緋弾のアリア
Aria the Scarlet Ammo
螺旋の天空樹
トルネード・ハイ
VIII
赤松中学
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メディアファクトリー

緋弾のアリアⅧ　螺旋の天空樹

東京武偵高校、そこは武力を行使する探偵――通称「武偵」を育成する特殊な学校。強襲科の超エリートでSランクの最強武偵・アリアのパートナーに選ばれてしまった（普段は）ただの一般人・遠山キンジ。犯罪組織『イ・ウー』の崩壊により始まった二つの連盟――『師団』と『眷属』の争いに巻き込まれたアリアとキンジ。そんな中、文化祭の準備が進む武偵高に、アリアととても関係が深い"あの人物"が現れて――。深まるアリアとの亀裂、孤立していくキンジ、失われた"アリアの隣り"をキンジは取り戻すことができるのか!?　大スケールアクション＆ラブコメディー第8弾!!

緋弾のアリアⅢ

螺旋の天空樹（トルネード・ハイ）

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

赤松中学

Jeanne
Aria
Shirayuki

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祝!!
8巻♪
こんにちはこぶいちです!!
今回はコスプレ満載で
楽しく描かせていただきましたよ!
ジャンヌの意外な一面も見れましたね。
それではまた次巻でお会いいたしましょう!

1st Ammo: Night of Chaos -Turbulent-

"—The ambassadors of the organizations, agencies, and associations who have gathered at 'Bandire'."

On the nighttime artificial island, Empty Island—

To the abnormal group, illuminated in the midst of the mist, the armored Jeanne spoke.

"First of all, Jeanne d'Arc of IU's Daio Nomad welcomes you with respect."

That voice felt as if an edge was concealed behind her words.

Even though she said something which was meant to welcome.

Ahh...Fuck.

Even the me that is not in Hysteria Mode understands.

The group that is gathered here is laced with hostility.

—The mood of all gathered was that of a critical situation.

(What the hell is...going on!)

When one meets an unidentified armed group, it is theorized that they should first get a grasp of the enemies' battle power.

However, the me as of now cannot do that.

First, who is my enemy and who is my ally? Starting from that, I did not know.

Jeanne, Reki and the person who had talked to me earlier...Fox-human?...She didn't seem to be an enemy, but...as for the others, I had no idea.

—I want Kana to be my ally. However, seeing that she appeared together with that "Witch of Sand" Patra, I have to stay alert.

After that, I did not know about any of the others.

If I act like this, my life will be in danger. If I stay in this place any longer.

However, running is also—

—probably an action which will put myself in danger.

Because, the instant I turn my back on this place, I will probably be shot by all those assembled here.

So, I—

(Fuck...!)

—just did nothing but stand. Right here.

Shit.

Why?

Even though I just want to be able to be a boring male high school student with an ordinary life...

Which piece of causality caused me to be dragged into this meeting filled with abnormal people!?

As if giving me a hint to that question—once again, Jeanne's rose-colored lips opened.

"As there are first-time comers here, I shall make a statement of introduction. Once, we kept ourselves hidden in the darkness of our countries, passing down our respective battle techniques and knowledge—chasing that which we sought, scrambling over that which we sought. Along with the power-gain of IU, that conflict was arrested, but...along with the destruction of IU, once again, the start of the gunfire will be attempted."

—IU—

That name which I did not wish to remember echoed in the depths of my chest.

With a nuclear submarine as its headquarters, it was the name of that organization, the place where the Jeanne that was standing here and other outlaw superhumans were trained.

Two months ago, I fought with their leader—Aria's great-grandfather, Sherlock Holmes...the result of that was, that organization was destroyed. It should have been.

That had been, for some reason, spoken of again.

As I gulped down my saliva, at the edge of my vision—

One of them had stepped out as if to address the entire group.

"—Everybody. Is there no path which does not return to that age of battle?"

Seemingly gentle, a somewhat glazed, sweet voice.

The most calm of everyone gathered, blue, cloudy eyes.

Eyelashes long enough to not need mascara, an impressive mole under her eye, she—outside of her beautiful face and neck, none of her white skin was exposed.

Her developed body wrapped in a pure white robe with golden embroidery, the hand which was holding a small rosarius also clothed in a long, white glove, she was wearing clothing which completely covered her skin.

A veil hiding soft, long blonde hair was not there, but...

This girl is probably a nun, right?

Probably, which is to say—she was properly wearing light makeup, and because, added to the fact that she was a sexy, beautiful woman...she was carrying something that a normal nun would

definitely not carry.

Trimmed with gold decoration, a sword that was so large it was like a joke.

"The Vatican had decided that IU was a necessary evil. Which organization IU, holding exceptional battle strength, was going to ally with was kept silent until the last, and as such, for fear of an "enemy who would receive IU's aid", none could take action against one another...the result being, for a long while, an armistice was realized. Do you not wish to protect such a precious peace?"

The nun brought her hands together, clutching the rosary.

I don't know who you are, but you're good. You said something really good. You seem like a *good person*.

No matter what, keep the peace. Also for the sake of me finishing this night without dying here.

"To tell you that the Vatican does not wish for war, tonight, I have come here. Learning from the experience of peace, let us combine our knowledge and achieve peace, and as for avoiding this useless fighting—"

"—It can't be done, Meiya. Hypocrite."

Diagonally behind her, interrupting was the witch in a black robe who had been staring at the nun, (it seemed her name was Meiya,) from the beginning.

The witch, the reason I could not help but decide she was one was...

Because, her figure, from head to toe, looked like a stereotypical witch.

Her short body wrapped in pitch black velvet, she was wearing a black peaked hat, and even a large raven was politely perching on her shoulder.

Even I, who was completely alien to SSR matters, understood with just one look. If she wasn't a witch, she was a fake.

Looking around 14 years old, her black hair tied up into a bob, on one eye she was wearing a burgundy eyepatch.

On the eyepatch...what is that black mark?

卍? No, like a slanted inverted-卍—aah, that is...!

In European history, the most abominable mark.

Former Nazi Germany's Hakenkreuz.

With just her crimson left eye, that eye-patch witch glared up at the nun, Meiya.

"You didn't have an armistice at all. You attacked my familiar in Dusseldorf. Peace? The hell are you saying."

At the witch had spat out her words with a tone filled with hate—

"Stay silent, Katze Grasse. You filthy, unpleasant insect."

...Eh?

I thought that as the nun, Meiya, suddenly changed her tone, raising her eyebrows.

"You demonic filth are different. Your very existence is a stain on the Earth. I feel no hesitation against exterminating and annihilating your ilk. I do not see any reason for your existence anywhere in the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the Apocrypha contained in the Bible. On an appropriate Holy Date, I have already planned to burn you with Holy Fire, rip your corpses into 8 pieces, and let them flow into several different rivers, so—say thank you. SAY IT! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!"

Completely changed from her calm demeanor of earlier, constricting the witch's neck and shouting, Meiya...

I take back my previous statement. She doesn't seem to be a *good person* at all.

Rather, it seems like she has a split personality. And, a rather

horrible type.

"Gyahahaha! Yes, this is war! The war with the Vatican I've been waiting for! This amazing chance, I won't let it go! Right, Hilda!'

Even though the tiny witch was being held up by the neck, she spoke to another girl while cackling.

The person who was spoken to was—

A girl who looked the farthest away from a human here.

On that back, bat-like wings grew, a girl with golden twin-tails.

"That's right. I too love battles. I can drink as much lovely blood as I want."

My eyes were once against drawn towards the space between the lips which had just released such a dangerous line.

Visible because the tip was coated with some sort of scarlet coating...those were fangs.

A girl whose canines stood out like Aria...it was not that feeling.

Sharper and longer, bat-like fangs were there.

"Hilda...I already cut your head off once, you're a rather stubborn girl, aren't you?"

Throwing the tiny witch away from her, this time, Meiya glared at the bat-girl.

Could it be...this nun is the one who has the most enemies around her? On the contrary to her peaceful words at the beginning.

"—will Dracula die to something like getting his head cut off? As always, the Vatican is so blissfully ignorant. Like I asked my father to tell me, for centuries, they haven't changed at all from the way they were in the past."

Hohoho, placing her crimson-manicured fingers in her mouth, the

bat-girl laughed, her rolled up golden twin-tails shaking—her name is Hilda, huh?—like an 18th century European dress arranged in a modern manner, she was wearing a Gothic Lolita outfit.

The frilly and sparkly part was the same as Riko's Sweet Lolita, but the color was based upon pitch black, radiating an ominous, decadent, demonic feeling.

And...between the panier under her miniskirt and her spiderweb knee-socks—the area that Muto had called "Absolute Territory", the area of the thighs...there, looking like a white tattoo was—I recalled seeing it.

In June, when we had fought in Yokohama, it was the same as what was on Dracula Vlad's body an eyeball design.

She was fair complexioned, so, in a location where it was very similar to the garter belt's string, it was very difficult to notice.

(Vampire, huh...!)

Other than Vlad, they exist?

This was the second time I had seen one, so my surprise was little, but, even so...she's someone I do not want to fight.

"Peace, is what was said—Meiya-san?"

Interrupting with a carefree voice was, a smart man who was dressed in colorful Chinese cultural clothing.

Under his round glasses, his eyes that were so thin they were almost like slits were smiling.

Despite being in the middle of such a dangerous group, he's so composed.

"That is something which is unrealistic, right? Because, from the beginning, for as long as the **Yangtze River**, tangled relationships and alliances have existed like in the **Yellow River**. Right?" [1]

Saying that, he looked up at Reki, who was sitting on the wings of

the wind generator.

Reki....just silent, cradled the Dragunov sniper rifle.

"—I too, if it were possible, would not wish to fight."

While using her ice-blue to eyes too look around at all assembled, Jeanne spoke.

"However, I knew that this time would come long before. The fact that, along with Sherlock's demise, IU collapsed, and we would once again be thrown into war. So, the meeting of this "Bandire" too was decided during his lifetime. Ambassadors. We cannot avoid battle. Because, in that manner, we sustain ourselves."

It had taken some time, but finally...

I too, began to see it. The true identity of this meeting.

Deducing from Jeanne's words, in this world, there are several underground groups like this which these people belong to.

IU was one of them. Vlad's race of vampires too, the organization Ranban which the Kokos had talked about too, Reki's Ulus too, they were probably those.

And, they stand against one another, form alliances with one another, fiercely competing with each other.

Thinking about what each was saying, this had been going on for a long, long time.

Not having been destroyed during that time—sending messengers here—as for those things, their relationship was one of close competition.

However, with the appearance of IU, a change was created in that relationship.

With a nuclear submarine armed with tactical missiles , they had a high battle ability and stealth, also, apparently staying neutral in the Other world, no matter whose eyes you looked from, they were

a dangerous existence.

If your own enemy becomes allies with IU, in the end, the power balance will be broken...in an instant, you might be brought down.

So, for a while, they had an "armistice".

Because, who would suddenly take that which was stuck in the table, the knife that was IU, they did not know.

However, now, that knife had disintegrated. It was mainly the fault of Aria and I.

"Then, in accordance to our ancient method, first, let us recite three pacts. It seems that, in the Bandire 86 years ago, it was in French, but I pray you forgive me for translating it into Japanese.

Clause one. No matter the time, anyone can declare war upon anyone. The battle is something that will conform to the rules of a confrontation, but surprise attacks, sneak attacks, spying, use of magic, and insults are allowed.

Clause two. For the sake of avoiding boundless slaughter, the use of ordinary soldiers who are unworthy of the confrontation is forbidden. This takes priority over clause one."

They were anachronistic lines, but the meaning...did not pass without being understood.

These two are rules that should be thought of as a set, right?

They fight as organizations, but they do not fight a total war.

Each organization sent out representatives of battle, just like in a card game, and based upon the confrontations of those representatives, victory and defeat was decided.

There did not appear to be any specific rules pertaining to the number of confrontations as well as the headcount of the representatives, but in short, large amounts of soldiers being sent out like in modern warfare and turning either side into a bloodbath was forbidden.

At the point in time where one's own organization no longer had any powerful warriors, one had to raise a white flag—was how it was, right?

The style of battle was rather ancient, but it wasn't nonexistent. It was like in Japan, where such a thing occurred during the Heian period. Warriors carrying the names of their respective areas would duel in order.

It would truly be fitting if one said that such a method was fitting.

"Clause three. The battle will primarily be split into two alliances, 'Deen' [2] and 'Grenada' [3]. These ancient names are maintained as a sign of respect for the previous generations of fighters who had come before us, it is something that is not to be changed for all eternity.

Which alliance each organization belongs to will be decided based upon the declarations here, but silence/unaffiliation is also allowed. Changing affiliations after the declaration is not forbidden, but based upon the prideful ones assembled here I believe that the matter will be resolved appropriately.

Next, we will begin the declaration of alliances...first, we, IU's Daio Nomad, wish to declare that we are to be part of 'Deen'. The nun of the Vatican, Meiya is in 'Deen'. Katze Grasse of the witches division as well as Dracula Hilda is in 'Grenada'. There should be no changes of affiliation, correct?"

Apparently finished with stating the rules, Jeanne called out the names of the three women who were talking earlier.

"Ahh...My Father. Please forgive me, who will once again grasp my sword—"

Gripping her rosarius in front of her huge, melon-like breasts, the nun, Meiya—

"Yes. The Vatican was originally 'Deen', exterminating the tainted of 'Grenada'. The founders of Legio Deen."

With her hand, clothed with gloves of white lace, she gestured at

the witch and the vampires.

"Ah. Of course, I too am part of 'Grenada'. Something like being Meiya's ally is unimaginable."

From the direction of the witch, Katze Grasse, who had answered with that,

"There's no need to even go so far as ask, right, Jeanne? As I was born, it was already decided that I was to be part of the kin of darkness—'Grenada'. Tamamo, is it not the same for you as well?"

This time, the bat-girl Hilda, her high-heels clicking, towards this direction...

No, towards the fox-girl who was by my side, she turned.

The fox-girl, having been called Tamamo, stepped out, the sound of clogs clacking on the floor ringing out—

Her ears, having been turned towards Jeanne up until just now—those pointed ears, sticking out of the top of her head, swiveled towards Hilda.

This girl...below a wooden box that she was carrying like a schoolbag, from below the hem of the Japanese clothing akin to a mini-skirt...whether it was expected, or whether I felt something else, a bushy tail stuck out.

It was clearly, a fox's.

"I'm sorry, Hilda. This time, I'll be 'Deen'. This is only a rumour, but it's because the modern Hotogi have an alliance with the Christian church. Patra, come this way as well."

Wa-wait. Hey, fox.

Just now, didn't you say Hotogi? And added to that, you seem to be acquaintances with Patra and Hilda.

Who are you? This fox-girl who is called Tamamo.

Unexpectedly, it seemed that there was a key person. Right by my feet.

Apparently, with ability users and monsters, relationships that I did not know about existed, and by that, she too seemed to be my ally. It was rather piecemeal, but I could read that from the atmosphere.

Before the mist, having been called out to by Tamamo, Patra, twirling a gigantic crystal ball atop her finger—

"Tamamo. For the things that your ancestors had once taught me, I give my thanks, however...towards the honor students of IU's Daio, I bear a personal hatred. This time, IU's Ignatius will be 'Grenada'."

With her upturned mouth, she answered.

"Ahh...What are you going to do? Kana?"

Patra, wearing clothing akin to a swimsuit, looked in Kana's direction from underneath the gold crown, which mimicked a cobra.

Kana, holding Scorpio, a scythe akin to that which a Reaper would carry,...my brother—

"Genesis 4:11—'Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream hid a meaning of its own'—I came here of my own free will, but that's how it is. "Unaffiliated" is what I wish to be."

Her gem-like eyes closed, she announced that.

"I see...well, that has reason..."

Patra, having heard that, *slump*...suddenly looked depressed.

Towards Nii-san, who had an expression which seemed to express, "There's no helping it..." while tapping Patra on the forehead, she blushed...

Nii-san.

Do you...plan to join this battle? What are you aiming for?

"Jeanne. Liberty Mason will also be 'Unaffiliated'. Let me observe the situation temporarily."

That deep, penetrating voice was that of the beautiful man in the trench-coat, deepest in the midst.

He was someone who gave off a dangerous impression which was so sharp as to give off the feeling that if one were to so much as touch him, he would be cut, but—

"—LOO—"

A more, no, the most mysterious person's voice...no, sound rang out.

If it were possible, I wanted to avert my eyes from it the whole time —there, below the rusted, slanted windmill, this existed, a silhouette which exceeded 3 meters.

More unlike humans than Tamamo and Hilda, a camouflage-painted metal man.

It, who had, from several places on its body, optical devices, antennae, grenades, smoke dischargers, etc...sticking out...at a glance, looked like a military vehicle, but that was incorrect.

First of all, it was not a vehicle.

In place of tires or caterpillar treads, it was standing on two feet with knee-joints directly inverse of that of a human body.

Also, on the left and right of its body, gigantic too, arm-like manipulators were there...rather, what the hell is that in its left hand, an M61 Gatling cannon—Vulcan...!

A Vulcan is—the name of a cannon that is normally attached to military vehicles, able to spray 120 bullets within a second, a demon-like weapon.

The ammunition used is a bullet that can weigh up to 100g, the M50. For something like a human, even being grazed will lead to a fatal injury.

It seemed that due to issues of cooling, it could not continue to fire for over three minutes, but even so, bringing this is cheating, right? That kind of monstrosity.

"LOO—LOO—...LOO—"

It, able to be called nothing but a bipedal tank...*Loooo, Loooo*...

It seemed to be speaking something, but...what? I don't understand.

"...LOO. I knew that you came from America, but I have no idea about you. If the fact that we cannot understand your method of communication continues, you will be seen as 'silent' when it comes to any alliance—is that fine?"

Having been told that by Jeanne, uncowed, it...

"...LOO..."

—changed its stance a little, like it was nodding.

With that, I understood a little, it was not an autonomous weapon. There was someone riding inside.

As it were, a humanoid close-combat battle machine.

I didn't really know its name, but—I chose to call it LOO. Jeanne too had called it that.

"—'Grenada'—!"

Suddenly, the person who raised that energetic voice with an Native American accent was—

Wearing a cat-patterned fur, a girl who looked around 10 years old.

Why is a child like this...?

—thought I, but immediately, I realized the reason. Along with a shocking scene.

After that girl had shouted, *Scrape...Thump!*, she held up a large axe that was by her feet, but...that axe was *larger than its carrier's body*.

Large, thick, rather than an axe, one should say that it is a large lump of iron.

Even the world record for women weightlifting in the clean & jerk isn't 200kg, but that was clearly a weight which exceeded that. I don't know accurately, but I expect that it isn't any lower than 300kg.

The small girl had lifted that. Furthermore, with one hand.

Thunk...!

The girl...pierced the floor with the axe's ferrule, an extravagant feather decoration attached to it, and a slight tremor shook the ground by her feet. What a feeling of weight. It even gave off the the illusory feeling that the entirety of Empty Island was shaking.

"—Havi—'Grenada'!"

That girl, facing directly upwards, repeated with that voice, habitually slightly nasal...

Flowers stuck into her hair, under that fringe, flipped up—mm?

Two horns were visible. At a glance.

—I see.

She too is *one of them*, huh?

Havi...seemed to be what she called herself, her horns were smaller than Aria's accessories.

On the left and right of her forehead, from the inside of her skin, they rose up in small, conical shapes. Rather than a horse's or deer's bony antlers, they looked more like the horns of a rhino or giraffe, horns that covered the skin.

—and as for that, that I have become able to calmly analyze monsters is making me feel rather pitiable.

"Tohyama. Which will "Baskerville" be?"

"...?"

Because Jeanne had suddenly faced this way—

My mind became a complete blank.

"Wh-what? Why are you turning to me Jeanne?"

"You are the person who defeated Sherlock, are you not?"

"N-no. If anything, I was caught up in the flow...when I went to help Aria, it just so happened that Sherlock was there, or rather..."

"You do not not know yet? For this Bandire, your faction—recently having the name of "Baskerville"—its leader's alliance declaration cannot be left unsaid. Because, you destroyed IU and are the spark that makes us fight once again."

"...Wa-wait. 'Baskerville'...that was just a student Butei team that was submitted to the school. It's different from people like you. Also, even if I'm the leader, I'm just one in name—"

"Tohyama. *You did it. If you did it, take responsibility for it.* Are you not a man?"

"Don't screw with me! The fact that I am here is only because I was suddenly called out here! What are you doing to me...!?"

"—'Deen' or 'Grenada'. Choose that which you think you will survive in."

"...Hey....."

To Jeanne, whose tone would not let me utter any excuses, I could not respond.

—I have nothing to do with this!

Even though I wanted to shout that and run...

Now, the sight of superhumans is gathered on me. With just that, I could not take control of my body's movements.

As if being stared at by a snake...no, like a frog that is encircled by a swarm of snakes.

Towards I, in that state, and Jeanne, the bat-girl, Hilda, raised her voice while spinning her parasol.

"All newcomers go into this unsightly panic, don't they? Jeanne, He's quite pitiful if you bully him like that. He didn't even hear, right? Tohyama Kinji. You are 'Deen'. Anything but that is impossible. Because, you are the enemy of the powerful veteran of 'Grenada', Vlad Dracula—my father."

As for Hilda, staring at me, *Fuun*, her nose making that sound—

I interrupted Jeanne's words, turning towards her.

I had thought that she was the same race as Vlad, but—his daughter, huh?

"—Then, I, as a representative, wish to declare that Ulus will be affiliated with 'Deen'."

Cutting through Hilda's words, the person who spoke out from above was—Reki.

"I, personally, am a member of "Baskerville", but because I am entering the same 'Deen', there should not be a problem, correct? As for my position as a representative ambassador, consent from Ulus has already been received."

Sitting on the propellers of the wind generator, not having moved an inch from when I had seen her earlier, Reki—

The man from earlier, the one in Chinese clothing with circular glasses, looked up at her, smiling.

"Ranban's ambassador, **Zhuge Jinghuan**
Shokatsu Seigen
will make his declaration. We will be 'Grenada'. Because, there is the debt to be repaid by Ulus' *Reki* for hindering our business a few days before. Then...you are the only one left?" [4]

So he said to another one standing in the midst of the mist.

Even though I didn't say whether I was going to participate in the battle or not, the flow suggested that my incident was already over.

(Give me a break...seriously...!)

Because of my own wariness, I could not interrupt the conversation, and so, I looked at the last person...

I did not know whether he had been listening from the beginning or whether she hadn't been, the man wearing a flashy pierro-like clothing—*Thud!*

He threw the cellphone music player that he had been listening to up till then and his white earphones to his feet.

"Tch. This isn't pretty."

He, raising the face which had just spit out those words...as expected...didn't seem to have been listening to the conversation.

With those eyes filled with irritation, he looked around at us and his face was colored with face paint akin to the war paint of the natives of someplace.

"Keh—this is laughable. I came here thinking that there'd be strong people, but, the hell is this? This is just a gathering of errand boys. All of you guys are pathetic. This was a waste of time."

Apparently, he too was the same as me, in the same "I-want-to-go-home team".

Wouldn't we get along?

But, it seems that the reason he did not want to be here is the exact opposite of mine.

"G-III—those that are gathered are certainly 'ambassadors'. Not military strength, but personal wishes and organizational recommendations as well as aptitude as an envoy, and the ability to understand Japanese etc. are used as a basis for those to be

selected. Also, this is not an obligation, but—as long as they are not like you, for ambassadors, choosing men who are not eunuchs and are not battle-hungry, as well as young women has been customary since ancient times. I acknowledge that each of us is not like that which you seek. However, is that all right, G-III? If you return like this, you will be counted as 'unaffiliated'."

"—Nothing to do with me."

To Jeanne, who had warned him, the man answered without so much as turning his sight towards her.

"...As long as you seek the same thing as us, as long as we scramble, eventually, we will fight. At that time, if we join either 'Deen' or 'Grenada', the number of enemies will decrease. We are not clear as to the numbers of every organization, but at least, of the 10-plus people that are, this will end without half of those here becoming enemies."

"Enemies?"

Feh, G-III spat to his side...is that his name?

At his discourteous behavior, Jeanne frowned.

"—Don't make me laugh. Today, I only came because recently, it seemed that strong people were coming out all around you. That all right? Next time, bring those that are the most powerful. I will kill them all."

G-III spoke those words, and from his body—

Zz...Zzzzzzz...as I wondered about that noise, akin to that of a broken fluorescent light...

His appearance became indistinguishable.

Literally, he disappeared. Now, I could see the flow of the mist behind G-III through him.

"...!"

Like in a special effects movie—an invisible man.

As I watched, going from half-transparency to full-transparency, G-III, who had disappeared...

He...he seems like a dangerous person. His ability, and judging from his words, his personality.

"—Commoner. You are like a barking puppy. You have lost even your killing intent."

Although it was night, Hilda, continuing to hold her parasol, spoke, a sigh mixed in.

"However, with this, it seems that everybody is finished. That is correct, isn't it, Jeanne?"

"...It is as you say. Lastly, this battle will...according to the habit of naming the land upon which Bandire took place, "Far East Warfare"—FEW is what has been decided. I thank everyone for their participation, and I pray for your fortune in batt..."

"Then, it's fine, isn't it?"

"...?—Already?"

"It should be fine. It has already started."

"Wait. Tonight...did I not say you were not to fight here?"

"That's true. This is not a very good stage. The altitude is low, and the weather is lacking. However, I've changed my mind. I have waited for too long, so let's go play a little."

You...what?

What are you talking about?

Why...

Are you looking this way?

Two people.

"Something like a council of declaration of war that has not seen blood...In the past, such a thing has never occurred...right?"

Smiling and showing me her fangs, Hilda and—

Jeanne. With a panicked expression, the Short Winking that she sent me was—"Run."—and at that, I widened my eyes.

"...!"

This congregation of monsters which had dragged me into the midst of it ended—

From now on, anyone can fight with anyone, is how it is!?

However, a sudden challenge apparently being outside of her expectations, Jeanne hurriedly raised her sword. And while its blade was being sheathed in crystallized ice, crackling accompanying the process—

...*Zzzzz*...*Zzz*...

At the sight of Hilda melting into the midst of her own shadow, just by her feet, I could no longer move.

What an—unrealistic scene.

I drew my Beretta, but isn't the opponent to shoot no longer here?

Like a dragged carpet, the shadow faced me, standing completely straight, wriggling.

"Tohyama, run! For 30 seconds, I'll restrict her!"

Durandal, thrown by Jeanne like a javelin *Zcch*—!

In that instant, the movements of the shadow began to dull. It felt as if it was stitched to the ground by Jeanne's sword, pierced through it.

However...it felt as if that stitching was incomplete.

Even so, it faced this way...and it was still wriggling. The shadow.

(This kind of...this kind of person...!)

Not even in Hysteria Mode, not having anything, towards me, just a high school student...!

What do you want me to do!?

Firstly, where do I run? Here and there, at these places where people that I know nothing about are, because of these monsters...!

As if pleading for help, I turned towards the fox-girl, Tamamo, and —

Tamamo did not look this way.

Towards the south side of the artificial island—looking towards the sea.

No, not only Tamamo.

That horn-girl who was called Havi, axe in hand, she was looking in the same direction.

"...?"

Along with those two, the monsters started to turn towards the south, one by one.

—Towards Academy Island.

A few seconds afterward, finally...*Drrrrrr*...that engine sound became audible to my ears as well.

That was the sound of a mini-motorboat running.

Thunk! The boat reaching Empty Island, impacting into it—after a while—

Bsh! At the southern tip of Empty Island, at the very brink, I could saw a *small hand* grasp it.

Th-that is...!

"It was right of me make SSR extend their network! Because, you had come to a place where my eyes could reach you. Just that bravery, I will acknowledge! You're there, aren't you!? Patra! Hilda!"

A high-pitched anime voice.

Nsh!, clambering atop the edge of Empty Island, a twin-tail with a sailor uniform.

Isn't that...Aria!?

"IU's remnants! I'll arrest you as one set! A gift to Mama's supreme court this month is ready!"

The entire situation apparently not visible from the mist—

It seemed that Aria still had not realized the danger of the place she was stepping into.

"A-Aria! Now is a bad time! Here, there is...!"

Putting myself aside, I shouted, as if preventing Aria from pouring oil onto the fire.

However, I did not expect that I could stop Aria, who was looking for the unarrested remnants of IU.

While going "!?" at the monsters, all facing towards her, *Shing, Shing!*

The platinum and pitch-black Governments were drawn in unison.

I-I said to stop!

"—LOO—"

The sound of operation ringing out, the walker tank, LOO, looked back—

"—You brought your minions!? Kinji! Since you're here, support me!"

Suddenly, Aria, *BangBangBang!*

Without warning, muzzle flashes lit the air.

"!"

The bullets did not hit LOO itself, but above his head, they hit the propellers of the wind generator, throwing up sparks.

The propellers were rusted, so they must have become fragile. One of them, showered with gunfire, *Kcch...Bch!*

Along with a tearing sound, it snapped off at the base.

"—LO...!?"

LOO, whose operational noise had been ringing out, made a movement as if looking up, but—*Gnng!*

It did not have an opportunity to dodge. Falling down was a propeller which weighed several tons, and crushed by it, it went into a position akin to crawling. It struggled, but it stayed there without rising.

I-I...didn't even know if it was an enemy or ally.

Aria...Suddenly, she did it.

With a feeling that suggested it had clearly malfunctioned, LOO was smoking.

"Aha! Ahaha! She came! She came!"

Standing there bow-legged and twirling, was the horn-girl from earlier—Havi.

Swinging around the massive metal axe like it was a knife, she danced.

As if this was a kindergarten where a fun game had just started.

"...!"

I looked towards Hilda, thinking to confirm, and this way—

Towards the back of the witch, Katze Grasse, who had burst into laughter at the sight of LOO being destroyed, the nun, Meiya—*Shhhh...*, turned—*Yssshhhh...!*, and with that noise, she wielded her massive sword—

"Witch of the filthy crimson tide...I WILL SLAUGHTER YOU—!"

Along with the high-pitched voice, with a momentum as if trying to split Katze Grasse into two parts, she brought the sword down.

Thunk!

With a movement which seemed to suggest that she had noticed a while ago, the witch, with a shortsword—decorated with kachiwaba engravings and diamonds, a sword that was akin to one that soldiers in old-Europe might carry—she clashed blades.

"Ahh, Meiya...really, it can't be cured without dying once, can it. That stupidity."

Katze Grasse used the short sword to parry, and—*Ching!*

Meiya's broadsword fell to the concrete by her feet, and through its own weight, the sword pierced the floor.

"N-not being cut obediently...Ahh, Lord, forgive this person's crimes...no, it would be splendid if you did not forgive them! In place of divine punishment, I WILL HUMBLY DO MY BEST."

Meiya, already short of breath, once again readied her broadsword in a low stance.

i-it's starting over there too.

— - What the hell do I do!?

Without any sort of forewarning, *Bssh!*, between the two, water burst forth—

Hidden by the camouflage of the water drops, the witch instantly

distanced herself from the nun.

And, from inside the black robe, which she rolled up, she snatched out two golden guns and began shooting.

That was—a Luger-P08. From the barrel which extended out from the body of the pistol, and the inchworm like movement of the toggle above the gun, I could figure it out.

Now, it was an antique, but it was a gun that was used by Nazi soldiers in the German army, a gun which was highly accurate.

However, as for that P08's bullets—*BangBangBang!*

Even though they were being continuously fired from a range of just 9m, they did not hit Meiya.

Fufun, making a triumphant expression, Meiya—I could not see what kind of technique she used.

It was a scene which was hard to figure out, but it seemed that the *bullets did not hit* Meiya. What happened just now.

"Tch. So, it was impossible after all. You really are damned lucky."

Flipping open her robe—exposing her pure white tights and violet garter straps, Katze Grasse restored her guns to her leg holsters.

And raising her short sword once again—fixing her eyes upon Meiya, who was readying her broadsword again, she sprinted forth.

Between the two—*Shh!*, a figure wearing a bulletproof coat interrupted.

The sound of metal rang out twice in consecutively clashes, and a dark blue scythe had simultaneously met the two blades.

"...Kana...!"

Giving me, who muttered that name, a wink which said, "Come back quickly," Nii-san, with the back of his scythe for the broadsword, and the handle of it for the short sword, had

completely stilled them into balance.

And, merely by changing the direction of her arms—Meiya and Katze Grasse's white and black robes fluttered into the air, and they fell to the floor.

"Excuse me, you two. Right now—it is still a little early. Shall we go back? Hmm?"

Smile—

The two, completely shocked, looked on as Kana, smiling with a face so beautiful it would put an actress to shame, receded into the depths of the mist, her high-laced boots ringing out. At that moment...

"Kinji! —Jeanne is here too!? What's going on!?"

Aria, sprinting all the way to my side, looked around at the surroundings—*Clink, Clink*

Her hands swift, she reloaded the magazines she had taken out of her skirt into the guns.

"Aria, get away! This is a bad place to be in! Don't you get it just from seeing it!?"

"In the beginning, I didn't really get it because of the mist, but no matter how I look at it, it does seem that way, doesn't it..."

Looking at Patra, who was walking towards Kana, Aria—frowned.

As if trying to intimidate everyone who was standing about her, she thrust her guns forward, her arms open.

"It seems that Patra is together with your brother—and it seems that Hilda has run away."

Having had that said to me, and remembering about Hilda, I looked around my feet, drifting in the midst.

Indeed...The shadow had disappeared.

No, not only Hilda. The unidentified handsome man in the coat wasn't there either.

Because of the battle which had suddenly started, he had quickly made his escape, it seemed.

Tamamo too...was gone. However, at my feet...a beautiful Temari with a checkered pattern had fallen.

Subtly sticking out from the Temari were things like that which could be found at the tip of a fox's tail...they had been sticking out, but as if noticing my gaze upon them, they pulled back into the interior of the ball.

...I don't really understand, but, 'defensive mode'...is that what it is?

Someone had moved. Thinking that, I turned around and—and at that point, the operator of LOO, which had been destroyed by Aria earlier, exited from within it, looking confused.

Looking at the destroyed robot, lamenting by going "LOO, LOO,"...a girl which was wearing a costume a navy colour akin to that of a school swimsuit. She too looked like a child around the age of an elementary school student.

Pointing at Aria and and raising her voice, seemingly angry, in a "LOO! LOO!", the girl stood up—

Apparently unable to do anything without the walking tank, the badge...no, medal attached to the swimsuit clinking, she tried to run away, barefoot. The eagle insignia which was visible for a second was—something that I had learned in Assault. It was a rank insignia. Of the American army. And, it was that of a colonel's. This is a joke, right?

The opposite of me, who had slightly relaxed from this mood of escape,

"Why did you come, Aria...! Be careful, Hilda is still here. And also, she's close...! Run away! She's stolen the—'Study of Scarlet' from IU! It's dangerous!"

Pulling Durandal, which was no longer stitched onto the shadow, from the floor, Jeanne warned Aria with her ice-blue eyes.

Around her body, in the midst of the floating mist...*Crackle, Crackle*;along with that noise, crystals of ice began to appear.

Diamond Dust.

Sending the sparkling crystals of ice, literally like diamonds, dancing through the air, this was Jeanne's magic.

The floating ice began to gradually accumulate, becoming a haze, hiding our figures.

Hidden by this mist of ice, she wanted to run, right?

Jeanne concentrated upon sending the particles of ice outward in something like a smokescreen—and at that moment.

"...!'

From within Aria's own shadow—

As if rising from the surface of a pool—

Hilda, her eyes shining with golden light akin to the Vlad of that time before, floated out of it, a half-smile on her lips!

"—Intâi gândeste, apoi porneste. Prilejui te face hot... [It would be better to confirm it before coming, wouldn't it. Just like a moth to flame...]"

Aria tried to turn around to Hilda, muttering in Romanian from directly behind, but she could not.

Hilda had already grasped hold of the back of Aria's neck with her crimson-manicured right hand.

—*Bang!*

The gunshot of a Dragonov—!

(Reki—!?)

Bsssh!

A 7.62mm x 54R bullet penetrated through Hilda's head from the top left to the bottom right, throwing her vertically-rolled twin-tails into the air, but—

"Kyaa!"

Behind Aria, who had cried out at the sound of the bullet impact, Hilda had just swayed her head aside.

Neither did she release Aria's neck.

And, looking up at Reki, who had shot her from above the wind generator...

"...***Baaang***"

Sticking out her index finger, making a pistol-shape with her left hand, she made a gesture as if to shoot herself in the head.

While smiling with her bloodstained face.

Sh-she too—is the same as Vlad. Bullets have no effect.

I can't do anything...!

"Foolish Butei girls are punished, you know."

Hilda opened her bright crimson mouth.

Those two fangs—their tips covered with scarlet metal—Aria's white neck, they—

"—!"

Bite...!

Pierced it.

"~~~~~~~~~~~~!"

And as for Aria, her camellia eyes widened with pain, next to her

face,

"Ha!"

Flèche Fente—With the graceful movements of fencing, Jeanne's Durandal flew through the air.

Schhhhh!

Hilda, parrying Durandal with the fangs that had just left Aria's neck, turned, getting away.

"What a happy miscalculation. Staying in Prime[5], I could remove my shell. Ohohoho...Ohohohohohoho!"

Bringing the back of her hand to her cheek—the blood from the gunshot wound which had been blown open by Reki had stopped—resounding in my ears, she laughed loudly in a voice bordering on ultrasonic.

"Houhohoho! Fii Bucuros! Fii Fericit! Hohohohoho!" [Wonderful! Excellent!]

In the midst of the ringing laughter which almost seemed to want to fill up our ears, towards the area below her left ear that was bitten, Aria—touching her neck with left hand, checked how much had bled. And, having confirmed that her carotid artery had not been cut, *Chck*—

Readying her Colts, she tried to turn around, but...

"...ch...!?"

Thud, a single knee dropped to the ground.

"Poison—!?"

I sprinted towards the pale Aria, and—

"...This is bad, one of Tohyama. It appears that this is worse than poison."

The Temari, rolling towards me though no-one had touched it, said those words to me from my feet. With the voice of Tamamo.

Worse...than poison?

What does she mean? When I looked at Aria, the meaning of those words struck me.

Aria's body was—

Indistinctly, starting to shine.

It wasn't an optical illusion. Around her body, something that appeared to be a haze of scarlet light was seeping out of her.

"...ch!"

This...is something I've seen before. Twice, in the past.

"Oooh..."

It was when she fought with Patra, who was over there, looking at Aria, raising what appeared to be a surprised voice.

And—when she fought with Sherlock in IU.

Aria has gone into that mode.

And, afterward, she had shot out a bullet of light with the power of a battleship's cannon.

But...from that time...it was a little different.

Rather than pouring outside—it felt as if the light was trapped inside, and that was a slight leak.

"Aria...Are you alright!?"

I shook Aria's shoulders with my both my hands, and—

Once, twice, thrice, Aria blinked painfully...

"..."

Staying completely silent, slowly, she looked up towards me.

"...?"

Those camellia eyes fixed upon me.

—Who are you?

As if saying that.

"...Aria...?"

—Wrong.

This gaze. This expression.

I understood because of the months that I had spent living together with her.

Even I know that this is strange. However—this *is not Aria*.

Who are you. Who is this...!

"Damn Hilda. You've learned even of the destruction of the 'Seven Stars of the Golden Shell?"

"Think of it as an honour. This is the first time in history. That humans have seen the cracking of the shell—"

The Temari by my legs exchanged words with Hilda, and...

"One of Tohyama. That Aria has come is the worst of luck. I will return one, so do not be afraid. Make it such that Aria does not move. Meiya! You return one as well!"

Saying that, *Sshhhhhh——-!* Raising up a puff of white smoke, it returned to the original Tamamo.

Tamamo, showing off a transformation like that of an anime or

movie, the fur on her ears and tail standing up—

Inside that small hand, she was carrying a Gohei akin to that a Miko would hold.

And, looking in Aria's direction, she grasped the two sides of the Gohei, readying it as if she was using martial techniques with a staff.

"...ch...!?"

Because the scarlet light had gotten noticeably stronger, I, continuing to grasp Aria's two shoulders, lost all words.

The light shined a bright scarlet, just like an inferno, but there was no heat. That was the same as before.

However, the phenomenon of light gathering at the point of her finger, which had happened before, did not occur.

A phenomenon different from that time...is that it? This, that is.

Continuing like that, the light—*Bang!*

As if bursting out of Aria's body—

"Uu...!"

In front, to the left and right of me, who was unable to do anything but support Aria's body and groan, the light scattered this way and that.

Shining like a blazing scarlet light, they flew, a multitude of scarlet balls of light—

That scene made me feel as if my eyes were being seared.

Bzzzz!

Turning towards that noise, which sounded like a power short, there was Tamamo, who was in the midst of catching one of the balls of light with the handle of her Gohei.

"Allllright, alright, alright. Good girl...go back, go back...ch!"

Appearing to be talking to the core of the light, Tamamo—

Squeeze, pressing down upon the two sides of the Gohei, she pushed the light back.

That done, as if jumping back from the Gohei, it returned to Aria's left breast.

"—Kyaa, ahh, ahh."

Raising what seemed to be a surprised voice was sister Meiya.

She too had caught a ball of light with her sword, and she was moving it, making it slide down the length of the blade.

Wobble, WobbleWobble, staggering around, apparently for the sake of restraining the ball of light, Meiya—

"...Nnn!"

Swinging the sword with a motion like that of a lacrosse pass, she threw the ball of light back.

Tracing a wide arc through the air, the ball of light flew a course which was slightly averted from Aria, but—

"—ch!"

Its trajectory corrected by Jeanne's sword, wielded like a tennis racket by Jeanne, who had sprinted forth—it too, returned to Aria's chest.

(...What the hell...is this...!)

What's going on.

I don't get it.

Still in a state of incomprehension, I looked around me, and the leftover balls of light were—

Hilda, Katze Grasse, Havi, Shokatsu, Patra...

By each of the five people who had chosen the alliance of 'Grenada', they were caught.

I looked at the hands of the five, and as I watched, the light, growing weaker, it seemed to become an extremely small jewel-like solid, apparently having stabilized.

"—As for that shell, I'll give it to everyone. As a reward attached to the 'Kin'. Also, it's because this is an act of hatred towards those which were father's enemies. Rather having I hold it as one person, this is much more hateful, is it not?"

The bat-girl, Hilda, turned her gaze to Patra and the rest from above, saying this to them.

And, she kept the grain of light, reminiscent of a ruby, which she too was holding by her chest.

"Kyaha...Kyahahahah!"

Havi, playing Otedama with the light, *Plop*, placed it in her mouth.

And, going on all fours like an animal, she agilely disappeared into the other side of the mist.

Witch - Katze Grasse too,

"Meiya, let's meet again."

Smirk, forming a smile which seemed to be formed by twitching her cheek—she sprinted towards a part of the mist which had become far thicker.

"—Thanks for this. This was a welcoming gift far above my expectations. I will return to Ranban's territory fortwith and have this analyzed."

While storing the grain of light in the slender bamboo pipe he had taken out from his chest, Ranban's Shosatsu too, seemed to be happy.

"My, you're going already? If you kill Reki, I'll help you, you know. I mean, just now, that girl shot me in the head."

While looking up at Reki with her golden eyes, Hilda said those words.

Reki looked down at Hilda, silent, still holding her sniper rifle.

"No, no. Because I am but a messenger, I do not fight by direct means. Wise men do not approach danger, or so they say."

While saying that in a gentle tone, Shosatsu—

Hidden in the smoke that was being spurted out of a smoke bomb which had been placed at his feet at some point in time, he was no longer visible.

"Hoho. Hilda, For you, father and daughter, there exists a debt because I had introduced you to IU. As such, I will take this without staying my hand."

Zccchhh—Hidden in the sandstorm which was intermingling with the mist, Patra too disappeared.

"*Fuuun.* Then, I too will call this a night."

Seeing that the 'Kin' other than her had gone, Hilda too...*Zcchh*...

Once again sunk into the depths of her own shadow.

As if having taken the acquisition of the scarlet gem as a signal, "Grenada" disappeared as one...

"Wa-wait...!"

While clutching Aria, who was just sitting there unmoving, towards me, as if protecting her—

I pointed my Beretta at Hilda.

But...I didn't shoot. A chance to emerge victorious remained unseen.

Already, the eyeball design at Hilda's thigh had sunk into her

shadow...

She, who had taken Jeanne's and Reki's attacks and remained completely undisturbed; She, who had subjected Aria to a state where she was unable to do battle in the space of a heartbeat, could I, not even in Hysteria Mode, defeat her?

No, in a position that I did defeat her, what would I do.

More than not understanding what had happened to Aria's body, it was something which was life-threatening, and in a position where only Hilda knew how to cure her, firing would probably not be the best course of action.

—What do I do. What should I do.

Incomprehensible. Right now, for me...!

"Bye bye. Let's play again sometime."

Appearing to be laughing at me, who was unable to do anything but point my gun at her, Hilda twirled her parasol, disappearing into her shadow.

And, that shadow too, as I watched, it became thin—and dissipated.

"...ch..."

Because all those who appeared to be enemies had gone, I looked at Aria—

Aria had...

Lost consciousness.

"...Aria...!"

Turning towards that voice, Jeanne had sheathed Durandal in its sheath, and she was sprinting towards the place where Aria and I were.

"Jeanne..."

As this was not the time to have a falling out, I had no intention of blaming anyone, but my tone was slightly interlaced with that feeling, wasn't it.

Coming over and peering at Aria's face, Tamamo pressed against my chest—

And, she looked towards Jeanne.

"Jeanne. You are not to blame. I had read in advance that this mostly would become a skirmish, but that this young maiden would come, that Hilda would use even the destruction of the "Seven Stars of the Golden Shell", was something that was beyond expectation for all of us."

Next to Jeanne, who was lowering eyes, seemingly regretful, was another person—

"She is..."Hidan no Aria"...is she not."

Meiya too, having replaced the sword on her back, had come.

"How dost it look, Meiya. Aria's condition."

"She has just lost consciousness...is what it would appear to be. There is nothing otherwise pertaining to her life."

"My viewpoint is as yours. Because, two of the scarlet shell are still continuing to function. She is weakened, but she should be safe for now."

Saying that, *Twitch Twitch*, and moving her fox-ears, Tamamo...

"Jeanne, thou shalt also hunt them down. **Reki** hath already gone. According to mine ears, they hath all scattered in every direction, however...if fortune is on our side, perhaps one might give himself away. Just, do not chase too far. I am strengthening our protection with 'The Boundary of the Devil's Contract'."

"Understood."

Jeanne gave a courteous nod to Tamamo, who looked far younger

than her.

"—Tohyama. I apologize. As for Aria's condition...hear it from Tamamo and Meiya."

Clank, her armor ringing out, she spun on her heel, looking up to the propellers of the slanted windmill—already, Reki's figure was no longer there—and from that, she started running towards the east tip of Empty Island, where it seemed her own boat was.

At some point, the fog had started clearing, and around me, the expansive Empty Island was visible.

Besides the broken walking tank and the light nearby, having been abandoned, as well as the wind generator, nothing could be seen.

All that was left was Aria, just sitting there unmoving, I, Tamamo, and Meiya, us 4.

There was not a trace, not a shadow, of anyone else.

(...)

It was a feeling as if...I had seen a nightmare.

However, this is no dream. This is reality.

I, still not understanding what on Earth had happened, had been dragged by that dream, and now I was here.

While holding on to Aria, who was sitting here, unconscious...!

2nd Ammo: Cosplay Cafeteria -Ristorante Mask-

Carrying Aria on my back, on the way back to Academy Island's boys' dormitory, I was wary that those of "Grenada" might make a U-turn and come attack us, but...Tamamo—

"In the end, they are nothing more than emissaries. From the beginning, I had released Shikigami into this area, and am having them watch. If the 'Kin' were to enter any part of this rectangular island, we will immediately be informed by Shikigami, so be at ease. Also, according to mine ears, they hath all crossed the ocean and skies, disappearing. Fufun."

—laughed at my unease.

As for Sister Meiya, she asked me for where I lived, saying: "I wish to do a little shopping, so please go on ahead first." and entered the convenience store.

I don't know the view of the SSR on the movement pattern of those monsters, but...because those two, who seem like specialists, had completely relaxed any form of alertness, it should probably be alright.

Rather, other than thinking that, I have nothing to base my judgements upon.

And...the next thing I had to worry about was Aria's condition.

Returning to our room, I laid Aria down upon the sofa, and—because it was enormous, It was possible to have her lie down completely flat, housed by the three-person sofa—Aria—

"...Nnn...Peach bun avalanche..."

—muttered things like that, sleep-talking, *Smile*, and as she slept, she smiled.

Certainly, it seemed that Aria had only lost consciousness...rather, it seemed that she was just in a deep sleep.

Her breathing while asleep also seemed to be as usual, and her pulse was also normal.

"Funfun...That there is no shrine here, what matter of house is this? Thine devotion is lacking, one of Tohyama. Funfun."

Suddenly complaining about something about my room and going 'Funfun' with her nose, Tamamo, going into the kitchen...

"Hast thou no syrup? Where is the syrup?"

While saying that, she took some pudding, which had "Riko's" written on it with magic marker, out of the fridge.

And, while muttering "Spoon, spoon, spoon", she took one of the spoon's from the kitchen, *Nom Nom*

Just by herself...she started eating.

What are you doing?

"Mmmmm. This too, is quite delectable. Tohyama. I give thee mine praise!"

Licking even the back of the lid of the pudding, Tamamo turned towards me with an innocent smile.

(Riko is going to get angry later...rather, why is she so friendly to me, who she's met for the first time?)

I sighed, and, *PatterPatterPatter*, Tamamo, scurrying this way—

"Mmmm. Thou art the current generation's Tohyama, art thou not? Thou art wondrously similar to the Tohyama that I had met at Nasuno. I could not have thought it from our first meeting. By the lanterns of midday, thou dost give off a feeling that thou art introverted, but good, good. Then, look here."

While saying something which seemed to hint that she was an

acquaintance to one of my ancestors, (and while suddenly seeing through my nickname,) she turned her back to me as if to show off the backpack-like crate she was carrying.

"...?"

"Look. Today, I too hath worked quite hard. Put the offering for the Tamagushi within."

Shake, Shake, when Tamamo shook her back, *Clank, Clank*, because the sound of coins rang out...

I finally understood.

This is an offering box.

She was walking while carrying that sort of thing?

"Tamagushi...?"

I said, stating my confusion,

"Quickly, put it in, put it in!"

Tamamo leaned her body foward, and her tail was completely straightened.

"...!"

—*Swish'*

At that sight, I took a step back.

...Th-this girl, isn't wearing...anything.

Because she was wearing Japanese clothing with a short inseam, and because of her tail, the hem had flipped up, and it became visible.

"He-hey! Wear something!"

"...? Not wearing sandals should be fine, should it not? We are in a house."

"No-not that, w-wear some panties! At least, make a hole for the tail to come out of in those clothes!"

"Pan...ties?"

Tamamo made a "?" symbol with her tail, *Spin*, and spun this way, "Art thou speaking of undergarments? If one wears such a thing with Japanese clothing, 'tis a loincloth. Do you not know of a thing such as that?" With that, she fixed the flipped skirt.

I wiped off my cold sweat, thanking God that because Tamamo had a childish appearance, I did not go into Hysteria Mode. Well, that's though this girl is probably also a kind of god.

Even so, just in case, I averted my gaze from Tamamo...

"Dost thou worry about Aria, one of Tohyama?"

"Of course."

I'm also worried about your lower body, though. Don't you ever catch colds?

"Do not linger over it. She will not become the Scarlet Blazing God immediately."

"...scarlet blazing god...?"

I frowned, and—

"...I see, do you not know of it? Well, it could not be helped. The Tohyama Samurai are dying out, after all."

Staying in the same place, Tamamo sat straight, her attitude a little careless.

"If nothing in the Tohyama family has been passed down, then I have no choice but to teach you. I am Tamamo—white-snouted golden-furred[6] heavenly fox...by your words, a monster, a demon."

She said it.

This time it's a demon, is it?

Well, ability users, witches, and vampires also exist. As of now, it isn't something to be surprised at.

"My mother too was Tamamo, my grandmother too was Tamamo—since times long past, our race has watched over the relationship between humans and Irokane, and prevented its misuse. For those multitudes of years, we established harmonies and hostilities, reaching up until now. This refers to Irokane, but in this girl's heart too...what I am about to say is not to be said to Aria...it is embedded. Also, an enormous amount of Hihiirokane, rarely seen before in history."

"Ah...ahhh. That, for once, is something that both Aria and I know."

"It is possible that Irokane and humans bond. As for those bonds, there art two types. "Method Bond"—a bond which gives the power of what thou call ability, and "Heart Bond"—a bond of emotions, in other words, were Irokane to bond too tight with a human, the human's heart will intermingle with the Irokane, and in the end, the Irokane will take it over."

Now that she mentions it,

At Hotogi's branch shrine in Kyoto, Shirayuki and Kazayuki had talked about it.

—"Irokane is a metal which communicates with human's hearts," was it?

"Taken over, by the Irokane...what will happen when that occurs?"

"She will become the Scarlet Blazing God. When she does, we kill her."

...!

"Ki-kill, hey...!"

Tamamo fixed her round eyes upon me, who had panicked.

"Do not panic. She will not become such immediately. However...if she doth become it, without hesitation, kill her. You saw her condition earlier, but it seems that that girl hath faith in thou. Well, thou canst do it, canst thou not? Even if thou does not, someone shalt. Even if it were I, 'twould be fine."

"Stop it...to kill or not to kill. That kind of thing—"

"'Tis fine even if war erupts on this planet?"

"War...?"

"Hihiirokane is a volatile Irokane which enjoys war and love. And, as for those who hath been invaded—the Scarlet Blazing Gods, a heart for war and a heart for love—those two hearts art driven into intense fervor, and the one that hath been affected becomes a Cursed God. In the past, seven centuries ago, there was a human who had become thus. That one seduced an emperor, inciting a war...and finally, she was struck down by the Hotogi Miko and Tohyama Samurai.

"...ch."

"I had said not to linger on it too much, had I not? Aria shalt not become such immediately."

"Is it being...prevented by something? Prevented from becoming like that?"

Still not understanding, I asked an amateurish question, and—

Nod, Tamamo nodded.

"So that such a tragedy would not be repeated a second time, what the Mikos of that time conceived was—"The Golden Shell."

"Ka...ra...gane?"

"A shell, 'tis a shell. Laid over the Hirokane as if plating it, a special shell, which only allows "Method Bond" to make its bonds, while "Heart Bond" is isolated. As such, a shell which was fitted for humans had been created. Because 'twas known that if the shell had

its seven layers, Heart Bond would be cut off, 'twas also named as "The Seven Stars of the Golden Shell". If the shell is in existence, Method Bond is slowly bonded...if it bonds in the length of three years, Heart Bond is completely cut off."

Three years—at those words, I remembered what had taken place in EU.

Indeed, Sherlock had said that.

As for Hidan's inheritor...until their ability is awakened, there was a need for her to co-exist with the Hidan for, at the very least, a space of *three years*.

Probably, that meant that that was until the "Method Bond" which Tamamo had spoken of was completed.

"That one, Hilda, used a technique which extracted the Golden Shell from Aria. I did not think that she had progressed her research on Irokane to that level. At least, 'twas not skillfully done. Thanks to that, 2 of the 7 layers of the Golden Shell had been returned."

"Two layers...what will happen?"

"Slowly, this girl will be taken over by the Irokane. Eventually, she will even become the Scarlet Blazing God."

"...ch..."

"Do not panic again and again. 'Tis alright for the moment. In that time, 'twould be well were we to take back the Golden Shell from those of "Grenada" No matter what, they are our opponents in battle. If we gather and return all layers, afterward, Heart Bond will be stopped, and she will return to as she was before."

"New...that, Golden Shell, can't one be newly made?

"A multitude of diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and emeralds...if we assemble a great number of materials, and train a hundred Miko and have them work, we shalt be able to make it. However, though the Golden Shell hath been conformed to the Irokane, there is a need for a hundred years. If we try to cover it, if the remaining five

layers art again created, we shalt not be able to make it in the time until the girl becomes the Scarlet Blazing God."

"Then...approximately, what is the period for which the two layers of the Golden Shell can hold it back?"

"I do not know. For there has been no-one who has attempted it. If it is merely mine opinion, then... this is but a guess, however, it should be a few years. 'Tis not something that shalt occur today or tomorrow."

"..."

A few years...huh.

What should I think of that?

If there exists only a postponement, it should probably indeed be possible.

Anyways, it seems that currently, Aria is alright...yes.

"However, Hihiirokane's 'Heart Bond' has slightly started. First, from now on, in regards to war and love, the girl shalt probably start to speak her heart without hiding anything. That is the symptom of the beginning. However, do not panic, and respond. Is that fine?"

War...and love...?

Thinking about it a little, I paused to look at the sleeping Aria...and nodded.

"Yeah. I understand."

War—In regards to fighting, Aria doesn't hide anything that's in her heart, right? Definitely, nothing will change from what has been happening up till now.

And, love—In regards to romance...this should be fine too, right?

Because, ever since the time we first met, whenever she had the chance, "I have no interest in it!" is what she would say. Aria, that

is.

At the opening ceremony, "So-something like romance...is completely useless!" starting with that, and when she was fighting with Shirayuki, "Romance—th-that's a waste of time, I've never had it before, and I don't plan on ever having it either!"...Towards Reki, "Things like romance, I-I...don't care about that! Really, really, reaaa—lly, I don't care at all! REALLY, got it!?" She even went that far to deny it.

So, Aria...won't change. At all.

When I thought that, the doorbell for the room rang.

"'Tis Meiya."

As if the outside was visible, Tamamo said those words, but just in case, I walked to the door, Beretta held in one hand...when I looked outside through the peephole, indeed, it was Sister Meiya.

"...Did you buy something back?"

While using polite language to ask her, who seemed to be my senior in age, that question, I opened the door, and—

"Ahh, Tohyama-san. That is a relief. Your room was here, was it not. I, because my strength was not enough, staggered around, and got lost. Ufufufu."

—while laughing with an 'Ahahaha', Meiya entered.

Somehow...she seems completely different from when she was attacking the witch, Katze Grasse, earlier...a friendly attitude. Somehow, it makes me feel a vague fear, at the fact that it kind of resembles the split personality of a certain Miko.

Tonight, that Miko, or rather Shirayuki, had gone out to the festival at Suiten-gū.

She had said that her return would be the morning tomorrow, but..

(Before, had we had Shirayuki's assistance, things might have

turned out a little different, wouldn't it...)

I casually looked into the vinyl bag that Meiya, who had not really been of assistance, had brought back, and...huh? What's that?

It was filled with a large amount of liquor.

This is a situation where she had completely bought out everything from the convenience store, right? Also, there were many several pastry buns. What?

Facing me, who was frowning, with a large smile on her face, Meiya...

"Tohyama-san. It is well that you were unhurt at that place, was it not? As expected, true to the rumours, you are a magnificent paladin."

Wearing the slippers reserved for guests, she took the vinyl bag and headed to the living room.

Somehow...besides the massive sword on her back, she radiated the air of the young wife living in an apartment building.

I too returned to the living room, and Meiya sat, straight-backed, upon the side of the sofa.

"Tamamo-san, how is Aria-san?"

While taking the liquor bottles out, she looked at Aria's condition.

"'Tis normal. However, as expected, the Golden Shell is insufficient. We art compelled to take it back from those of 'Grenada'."

"Well, well...*Slurp*"

Ah. She drank. Lejay Creme de Blueberry...she took the sweetly-scented wine, which appeared to be a cocktail base, straight up.

Whether it be Tamamo or this person, I wonder;when they have finished their work, do the people of 'Deen' feast?

"However, to have Tohyama do that, it seems a heavy burden. Let us do something. Meiya, attack Katze Grasse with haste. Take one back and return. She will return to Germany, will she not?"

"Yes."

Suddenly draining the strong liquor like it was water, Meiya nodded.

And, while placing the empty bottle upon the low table, she took Uguisu-bread, thought to be a chaser, and the next bottle of liquor out.

(Ah, that is...)

Bailey's Irish Cream—Medica's Ganaha-sensei had been drinking it during the lesson—giving off a scent reminiscent of sugared pastries, it was a a high calorie, strong liquor.

Meiya emptied the liquor in a full gulps, and again, she opened the bottle of bourbon—Wild Turkey, her lips pursed.

Uuu. I haven't drunk anything like liquor, just looking at it is starting to make me feel sick.

"U-um...that..."

To I, who tried to continue with 'Is bad for your body'...

Smack, Meiya stopped me with the hand that was clad in long, white gloves.

With the movement of her shaking her head, her light blond hair shined in the air as it swayed about.

"I know what it is you wish to say. It is true that a nun cannot drink liquor."

"N-no...it's not that..."

"But, there are sisters other than me that are like this. We are exceptions. One type of ability user takes away from her own body,

and to disperse the ability, after battle, they have to take in a large amount of something orally, or they will die. Sugar, protein, ascorbic acid—what has to be consumed differs from person to person, but mine is alcohol. However, do not worry. Because in Italy, it is tolerated to start drinking liquor from the age of 16, and as such I have a constitution which will not get drunk. I am sorry that this sin of heavy drinking is so unsightly. Oh Lord, forgive me; *Gulp Gulp*...Haaaah."

Immediately after having asked for forgiveness from God, she drank again.

Well, this person...other than having breasts more gigantic than Shirayuki, her whole body is slender, no matter how much she drinks these high calorie liquors, she'll be alright. As far as I've seen, she really won't get drunk.

I've gotten used to seeing that level of unnatural phenomenon, from Aria's peach bun scourge and the super pot ramen incident with Reki. It's so sad. These days, if I become surprised at these things one by one, I would lose heart. I've already learned that.

In the room, full of the sweet scent of liqueur—

I too sighed, and sat on the sofa.

I had become worried again, and I checked Aria's temperature with my hand...It's normal...isn't it...

"Tamamo-san. I will definitely kill Katze Grasse. The peace conference at Bandire has failed, and at this rate...She will be tried by the Inquisition, and she will be excommunicated, torn into 8 pieces, and discarded into an unnamed grave without even a cross...I will, to-together with those witches, will go to hell...!"

Trembling where she sat, Meiya-san opened the bag of chasers, ripping it.

"At least, I will show you the completion of the witch hunt! The Canossa denomination too is negligible!"

...Canossa...?

I know of it because Nii-san had studied abroad for a short time at the Rome Butei High, but that is the name of the organization which is called SSR here, isn't it?

Th-this person is a high school Butei student?

If she is, the Butei Highs all over are the same, aren't they. They're full of weirdos.

"...Well, 'tis good that thou art motivated. How was it? Did Kana draw you in?"

Kana.

Towards Tamamo, who had spoken Nii-san's name, I lifted my face.

"I...do not know. Because, Senpai has changed a little from how she was before..."

"Meiya-san. You seem to know Kana—"

I interrupted the conversation, and Meiya, a bottle of Żubrówka in her hand, faced me with a smile.

"Yes. She is your Onee-sama, is she not?"

...Onee-sama...

We-well, I'll just stay silent. Gender is one kind of personal information, after all.

The fact that Nii-san will break every bone in my body if I speak freely is also rather unpleasant.

"I have to introduce myself a little bit to Kana-senpai's little brother, don't I...I am Meiya Romano. 18 years of age. My nationality is the same as my mother's, Italian, but my father is Japanese, and his name..."

On the other side of the long receipt, Meiya wrote the words "明夜",

"It can be written this way."

She showed it to me with a knowing smile.

...Just in case, "Ahh, I see. That was surprising" I made that face.

Apparently satisfied with my reaction, Meiya flashed a sunflower-like smile.

"—As an exorcist in the Vatican, I am inducted by the holy order, in the Rome Butei High I am a Kanossa fifth year—Ah, in Italy, high school is up to five years. I was not held back. Then, during those two years, I had hunted criminals together with Assault's Kana-senpai. I might say that I get along very well with her, or I might say that we are on the same wavelength...It was fun to do my job."

"Ahh..."

I let out a voice which seemed somewhat comprehending.

Indeed, this kind of calm personality would get along well with Kana.

"At that time, whenever I taught her recitations from the Bible, she was able to remember it immediately...I remember that I was very surprised by the quickness of her mind."

I see. The fact that the Nii-san from after his transfer started to occasionally recite verses from the bible is from this person's influence.

"Nii-sa...Kana has a special ability. When she is Kana, she can remember the entire contents of a book she has read once. That's kind of like cheating. It's not a trait to be surprised about."

In short, it's just being able to memorize it with the power of Hysteria Mode.

That's unfair, Nii-san. Even though you told me, "You can't abuse HSS for studying."

"Now that you mention that, Tamamo. You too started talking to Patra suddenly. Is she an acquaintance?"

I asked Tamamo, who was extracting a cream bun from Meiya's vinyl bag, and—

"Mm? Ah, ahh, Patra? Yes. I hath met her before."

Tamamo, sitting straight again, brought the bun around to her back, and while covering it with her tail, she answered.

"In the war before, I was "Grenada". At that time, I was companions with Patra's great-grandmother. The person who taught her Japanese was me. After the war, in preparation for the next war, it seems that she taught her descendants Japanese as well. Therefore, well. While she hath an accent, Patra's method of speech is akin to mine, is it not?"

Indeed...I remembered that Patra used a rather ancient mode of speech.

That was because, the great-grandmother who had taught her Japanese had in the first place learned ancient Japanese from this Tamamo.

"...The last war, you say. Isn't that a story from a time long past? Around the time of Patra's great-grandmother, whom you spoke of. How old are you exactly?"

Because of Vlad and Sherlock, I was confident that I would not be surprised even if I was told 100 years old by that childish-looking girl, but...

"I? I was born on the second year of Kennin, therefore I count 808 years old."

"What...!?"

Because of my surprise, no other words would leave my mouth.

I-Impossible.

She's been alive since the thirteenth century, the Kamakura period?

"Rather, look, one of Tohyama. Asking a goddess her age is nothing.

Thine faith is insufficient!"

No matter how I looked at her, Tamamo, hitting my knee with her tiny hand, was an elementary school student...

Also, she even looked like she was in one of the lower grades.

"I-if that's so, shouldn't you dress up more like a grandma?"

While pulling my knee away, I responded, and—

"Originally, I was a giant fox. I had transformed, taking upon this appearance. When I transform into a human, I cannot change mine mass. If there was a granny that was this small, it wouldst seem suspicious, and I would not be able to be in the city, would I? Therefore, I became a young girl. Understand that much without having to ask!"

While responding with some reasons which I didn't understand even if I heard them, Tamamo continued to hit my knee with a gohei which she had procured out of somewhere. It hurts, I said!

"If you don't want to seem suspicious, then get rid of your ears and tail first."

I said the most obvious thing, when...

Was it because that wasn't possible? Tamamo's face went completely crimson—

"That is not something that thou canst understand!"

It seemed as if her sore point had been touched.

"If you're going to look like a child, I'll treat you like a child. If I, for example, use respectful language towards you outside, I'll seem suspicious. Just having a man that uses respectful language to a young girl about seven years old is something that people will report about. In the Japan of today, that is."

While pushing the gohei back, I also got a little irritated—

"Even though thou art a new one...this generation of Tohyama is impertinent! Is this fine, one of Tohyama? I have experienced 'War' countless times, and if I am to say it, a veteran! The way to fight, the way to survive, the way to steal, the way to protect, I knoooooowwwwww very well. Therefore, respect thine elders more! Show me some faith!"

—saying that, she caused a clanking noise to ring out as she swung her back this way, got onto all fours, and stuck the offering box outwards.

"Add in thine apologies, and put it in! Put in your faith!"

...In the end, money? Rather, don't swing your tail and butt this way!

I thought that she was really insistent, so putting in about 100 yen should be good, but I shouldn't spoil a *child*.

So that I could become *distant* from this person, I took a *ten-yen coin* out of my wallet- [7]

"Alright, alright, I'm sorry, granny."

I put it in.

"Mmm. Tohyama-san, you will definitely profit."

Meiya applauded at that scene.

...It seems that without me knowing it, I've been sucked into a war between monsters, but...

When I looked at these two, apparently the few allies that I have...

My uneasiness increases. By a lot.

Afterward, Meiya said that she was taking the last bus to Narita Airport and went back, Tamamo also left these words: "The boundary field shalt immediately expand. This evening, do not leave this floating isle," and around 2:00 in the morning, she left the

room.

The bags of bread had been cleaned up, but...Ah, the empty bottles of liquor were all over the table.

Well, it should be fine if I clean them up tomorrow. Today, I'm already worn out.

The actual bottles were pretty stylish after all; I'll just think of it as some interior design.

"Haaah..."

...The attitude which had intensified at the 'Bandire' had completely relaxed thanks to those two, or rather, as a result of those two.

However, I was worried about Aria, so I covered that small body with a blanket...

The electricity still on, I decided to be like Reki and held my gun, sitting down on the sofa and going to sleep.

Afterward, I did lay my cheek on it and start getting drowsy, but—

I had a dream that Aria became a vampire and went wild, and I couldn't sleep properly.

Even so, I did slip into a mildly deeply sleep, and in the morning...

Tweet, Tweet...within the cries of the swallows...

"—Idiot Kinjii!"

—*Smash!*

"—Kuh!?"

Suddenly, my face was kicked by a foot in black knee-socks, and I woke up.

"A...Aria!?"

Had she woken up?

While rubbing my eyes, I turned towards her, and Aria—

"Ki-Ki-Kinji, you...Wh-what!? What is this!? Whatwhatwhat!? WHAT THE HELL IS THIS!"

Despite being in her uniform, she was hiding her body with a blanket, trembling.

She was shaking to an extent where it looked like she was splitting into 2~3 people.

However...within me, who saw that, I breathed a small sigh of relief.

(—She's the normal Aria...!)

I understand.

My face was kicked, and she said something, but her movements and way of talking was as the normal Aria's.

"Aria, that's great..."

While cutting off the words of I who had spoken as usual—

"Wh-Wh-Why am I alone together with you, i-it's already morning, you know! In...In a room with nobody else in it! Just the two of us! St-staying the night!"

Redden!—Yes, 0.1 seconds.

The speed of her high-speed-blushing technique was also normal.

(But...what's she getting red at?)

Shuffling backwards from me, who was frowning, Aria, on the other side of the blanket thrust outwards like a matador...

Rustle Rustle, she felt around inside her clothes.

What...is she doing...?

I thought, and when I thought it, 'Kching!', she was stretching her hands towards her guns!

"He-hey Aria! It's fine if you're not normal to that extent!"

"You...what did you do to me! Honestly, without hiding anything, lay open the situation in detail! Idiot Kinji is really an idiot! You've skipped way too many steps! A hole! 20 hole combo chain-fire!"

"He-hey, calm down! Even if you put two of your handguns together, you can only go up to a 16 chain-fire! Rather than that, what have you been saying up till just now! Yesterday, you were at Empty Island and—"

"Yesterday...Empty Island? ...? ...? I do-don't have any memory of that—"

Aria, who said that, looked at the empty bottles lined up on the low-table made out of glass and "!" widened her eyes in a perfect circle.

"Kinji...I-I don't remember anything...That, th-that trick...I've seen it in movies and dramas before...!"

Pointing at the multitude of liquor bottles, she glared at me.

What had she understood, and how had she interpreted it? She was glaring at me as if I was some massive criminal.

"He-hey, by 'trick'..."

"I didn't think that you would do things of that level, but I-I was careless...! That's a common method of a womanizer...you really did it, didn't you...? ...? Ouch—"

—*Splish*

Apparently, Aria had noticed something wrong, and she pressed down on the scar left on her nape, bitten by Hilda.

There was mostly no bleeding, and it seemed that the wound had already clotted, but—

There, a lip-shaped scar was left, having been violently sucked by Hilda and clotted.

"No! No! No way!"

And blushing even further, she fountained steam from her head with a 'Choo Choo', and runaway locomotive Number-Aria—

Thump Thump Thump!

—ran towards the washroom in massive panic.

"—Gyaaa!"

Raising a scream which I couldn't have thought belonged to an English noble, *Thump Thump Thump!*

She came back.

More than any monster at the Bandire, it was a terrifying appearance.

"Wh-Wh-What did you do to me!! You Ero-Kinji!! YOU SERIOUSLY ERO-KINJIIi!"

Wh...What is it! This time!

- Aria and I woke up in the morning, just the two of us.
- Aria has no memory of last night. Furthermore, there are many empty liquor bottles on the table.
- On Aria's nape, there is lip-shaped clotting.

Why do I have to be screamed at because of the three of these things combined!

"W-Wi-With this..."

Aria, who was pointing at the lip mark on her neck with a trembling finger—

"With this, today—I CAN'T GO TO SCHOOL, CAN I!! YOU SERIOUSLY STUPID KINJI——!"

Wh-why!

Why is that because of that clotting, you can't go to school!?

"—If you're going to stick something on, at least think a little bit about the consequences! You Ero-Baka-Kinji! EBK!"

Tears in her eyes, Aria, who had stamped her feet in rhythm, (and anger) to that original phrase, had a menacing look, and in response to that I was also just about to break into tears.

One question! What the hell did you think, and what should I stick on! What should I!?

Without even making it in time to stick my hand up to ask that question—this was also normal—Aria, who had used the sofa as a stepping stone and jumped, flipped her skirt—

"HOLE MISSILEEEEEEE!!"

Like a missile, she brought a two-legged drop-kick deep into my face.

Afterward—for some reason, Aria was embarrassed even looking at my face, and with that attitude she shut herself into her own room.

Even when it was time to go to school, she didn't come out.

It seemed that she seriously wished to take a break from school.

This was after what had happened yesterday, so I didn't want to leave Aria, but Tamamo had said that 'Grenada' had crossed the sea and sky—probably with ships or planes—and left this place.

And also, Shikigami....speaking by my interpretation, a net was strung out which acted both as a radar and alarm, she had also said.

Furthermore, Aria is the owner of battle ability enough to suddenly defeat the walking tank LOO; if the I who was not in Hysteria Mode was here...I'd just drag her down.

"Then, I'm going. Just in case, don't let go of your swords and guns. Make sure you've plenty of spare magazines too."

I spoke to the door of the small room which Aria had decided as her own room of her own will, and decided to go to school by myself.

From within the small room—

"...Huh...When did I shoot...Eh...?"

Aria, who was counting her bullets and speaking to herself—

Really had lost all memory of yesterday night.

I had seen this often at Assault, but when people suddenly lose consciousness, the memories of before and thereafter will be blown away.

"Also...I heard this from a certain trustworthy person, but you're being targeted by the remnants of EU, you know. Those guys have a lot of friends. The Koko sisters from a while ago are also one of them. Be especially careful, alright?"

Avoiding the matter of Irokane which I had been told to not speak about by Tamamo, I told her this just in case, and...

"That's the same as what's been happening up till now, right? Qu-Quickly go to school."

With a tone which seemed to be driving me away, she responded with her anime-like voice.

With the beginning of the day, I took the lessons of the subjects English, Chemistry, and Japanese Characters, and—

At the fourth hour, right before the combined long-homeroom of three classes started, Aria finally came to school.

Looking, a band-aid was stuck to her neck. A kitty-patterned one which Riko had brought into our room.

The remnant of the clotting had naturally become small, and it seemed that she had just passed the time until she was able to hide the clot with that.

Getting red again when she looked at me, Aria sat down on the seat next to me, when...

With amazing obviousness, she didn't look in my direction.

But, as for being angry...rather than that, it seemed that she was embarrassed.

I couldn't hear the signal of her rage-mode, the purring of a lion cub, and occasionally, she would glance this way, blush, and resume her stare forward.

I don't really understand the meaning of those movements, so for the time being, I'll ignore her—

(Then...besides all this, should I tell her about what happened last night...)

While everyone moved to the sports hall in which the long-homeroom was being carried out, I thought about that point.

It seems that Aria has no memory of last night.

Even if I suddenly explain about the unbelievable circumstances which had taken place yesterday to that kind of person...she wouldn't believe it. And it seems that Aria has randomly become vigilant against me.

With that, rather than having just me say it, it would be better to bring Jeanne and Reki into this too, and after setting down the direction to go hereafter, talk about it with everyone. It's said to form a tiger of three, after all. As for Shirayuki, Tamamo had said that: "I shalt look for an opportunity and speak with her, so nothing should be said from you, Tohyama," but that was probably also for the sake of preventing the dissemination of information towards Aria.

Also, there is another danger that talking about 'Deen' and 'Grenada'

would pose to Aria.

Putting aside that she was about to win the trial, those are the people who had Aria's mother take the fall.

If I told Aria about yesterday, she'd probably say something like: to go arrest Hilda, I'll travel all the way to her base—this is just my imagination, but there's probably even something like a castle in Romania.

(Well, I understand her feelings, but...)

That was something especially dangerous.

—First of all, if a Butei's battle becomes an away-game, it's an overwhelming disadvantage.

This is something which is immediately understood even by feeling.

A direction which should corner the enemy, and conversely a place where oneself can retreat, the home-game where the location ammunition, food, and water is all known is far easier to fight in. Backup coming from Connnect, Logi, Medica will obviously dull if away.

—Next, the battle-ability of the enemy is still indeterminate.

I had heard this from an instructor who had come from the Jietai; in land-war, there exists thing called 'The Law of Treble Attackers'.

Speaking simply, to be victorious in invading an enemy's territory, one needs at least three times the battle-power. Around that much, an exhaustive amount of energy is needed to 'Invade'.

Therefore, for now, I'll just leave the warnings to Aria to the contents of what I had said this morning—

(Let's observe her condition for a while...)

Last month, I had been subjected to being the leader of Team Baskerville.

I had been informed afterward, but for every team leader, there is a required lecture called 'Tactics I', and I had earnestly attended it. Because it was rather easy to get credit from it.

As a result of it, or maybe thanks to it, I had now picked up the habit of thinking about this kind of thing.

"Brats! We're deciding the costumes for 'Ristorante Masque,' which we'll be doing at the culture festival!"

Clang!

While quieting the talking students with a warning shot towards the ceiling, Assault Instructor Ranbyou shouted.

The second-year students of A, B, and C-Class are gathered in the sports hall, but...Jeanne of B-Class was...I don't see her. It seems she's absent.

My phone didn't connect either. While avoiding being eavesdropped, she probably was chasing after 'Grenada'.

"Alright, each of the teams gather, and go on standby—*cough cough*!"

Lezzad Instructor Tsuzuri spoke, and because the people of D-Class and E-Class, and X-Class, who rarely showed themselves, weren't here, the members of the same teams started to group together just as they were.

Bloody Tsuzuri, if you're about to choke then don't smoke inside the sports hall.

With that, besides me, who was frowning, wasn't just Riko and Aria from the same A-Class, Shirayuki from B-Class and Reki from C-Class had gathered.

"..."

Because there was that incident from yesterday, I indirectly sent a look to Reki, but...

"..."

Reki was Reki. There wasn't any reaction at all.

Wearing the same headphones as always, she was zoning out.

(Well, this is the wrong place to have that kind of talk. Guess I'll do it after Jeanne comes.)

Rather, those...those headphones.

She isn't receiving any Kinji-sniping orders from Wind-sama, right?

I thought, and lifted the headphones directly off her head. When I put them on, trying to listen—

Click. Reki used the remote control attached by a cord, and Fire Starter by the Prodigy became audible, starting with a deafening instrumental which was like air-attack klaxons had started screaming in my ears.

Wh-What the hell is this? What's this supposed to mean? He-hey. Don't turn up the volume! Turn it off!

Bloody Reki. She had me hear a sound which was like a warning. Did she get mad that her headphones were taken?

Reki kept facing forward, in Aria's direction, not looking this way, so I didn't know her expression, but...

"Kin-chan, the lottery box has come around."

"Ah, thanks."

When I realized it, Shirayuki, who was keeping directly by my side, had spoken, so I came back to reality, and returned Reki's headphones to her head with a thump.

The box, brought by a helping first year, had a round hole opened on its top...It was the lottery which decided the *costumes* each person was to wear there—at the "Ristorante Masque", which one section of us second years were in charge of for Butei High's culture

festival.

(This lottery is also me laying my life on the line, huh...)

In a normal school, Ristorante Masque would be something like a cosplay cafe, but this is the abnormal Butei High. Acting out the professions held by the worn costumes, behaviour like that is what is looked for.

Something like that I can't allow.

Looking from Butei High's point of view, this is a chance for students to appeal with their undercover investigative techniques without seeming strange, so if one doesn't do it properly, a terrifying punishment was waiting, coming from the Masters' All-Stars.

In short, this is a grave lottery which is entwined with my life.

"Then, Master, please draw one. This is the male box."

Ah. Isn't this Fuuma? She's carrying the box. I just realized, though.

You, don't call me 'master' in front of people. I'll give you hell with my scramasax.

"Also, only one redraw will be recognized. Then, may the fortunes of war guide your hand."

In response to Fuuma, who was smirking up at me for some reason, I remained silent and inserted my hand into the box. I started to fumble around the innumerable double-folded papers which were inside.

(...Well a good one come out for me...?)

Nothing as good as what I'm praying for will come out, though.

Mmm...the ones at the bottom of the box will probably be my target.

Nobody knows the method of making this lottery, but they wouldn't

write the outrageous things straight off the bat.

By the way, among the huge misses, there is the thing called 'Female Clothing'.

If I draw that, I'll commit suicide by pistol right here.

It's a lot better than death by lynching at the hands of the teachers.

"What...What is it...?"

I hesitatingly opened the paper which I had pulled out...

"Shinto Priest"

No, no, no. It'd be difficult to act like this.

Ignoring Shirayuki, who had stolen a glance at my paper and ecstatically burst out with things like "Kin-chan-sama, we really are fated to come together!", I said, "I'll change," and put my hand in the box once again.

"If you are changing, then the first will be declared void. The second costume will be forced upon you."

I knew that, so the second one, which I drew with desperate resolve was—"Policeman (M.P.D. — Patrolman)"

Thank God. If it's this, I think I'll somehow be able to tide it over. I'm always there anyways, and observation is easy.

Exhaling a breath of relief, I sat down right there. With this, one thing is settled.

Looking around, there were many first years holding boxes and walking around...from everywhere in the sports hall, the voices of delight and wails could be heard from boys and girls who had drew their lots.

"Master. Jeanne-dono is absent today, but she had designated Master as the drawing-proxy in advance. Patience."

Fuuma stuck the female box out, so I also drew a lot for Jeanne.

"Waitress (At Home Cafeteria)"

...I don't know the name of the shop, but it should be fine, right?

Rather, it's whatever. At least it's a human.

"Then, next is Riko. I'm goiiing!"

With a composed gesture, Riko, with a frilly uniform, took a piece of paper out from the female box.

Good for you, huh. Dressing up is your specialty after all.

Rather, it seemed that she knew about Bandire since last month, but is it fine to talk to her about yesterday? There weren't any instructions from Tamamo, so I don't know, but...

Looking, Riko's first draw was "Thief (Manga [Cat's Eye] Style)"

Uwah. That's some drawing ability you've got there, Riko. A thief. Isn't that fitting?

Wonder what it'd be like if you became a mahjong player. [8]

Before me, who was stunned—

"Eh...There's no point in cosplaying like this!"

Flutter.

Riko threw the piece of paper behind her.

He-hey, you're going to throw that card away?

The second lot which Riko drew was "Gunman (Western Pioneer Age)"

The person herself went, "Oooh! I'll do it, I'll do it!" seemingly overjoyed, but why's there a role which ends in 'man' in the female box? One really can't get careless. In this lottery.

Shirayuki, who continued...

Had the first lot "Chinese Dress", but said "My body's curves will stick out, and it'll be really embarassing, so..." and canceled.

I imagined it...

Th-that's right. Please stop. If you were that, the curves of your large chest will clearly stick out, and furthermore because of the slit of the dress, those plump thighs with snow-white skin will be visible up until your waist.

If I'm showed that, there's the horror that I'll go into Hysteria, and the Ristorante Masque will devolve into chaos.

"That's great, if it's this, then I think I'll be able to do it..."

The second lot of Shirayuki, who spoke, was "Teacher (Arbitrarily Elementary～High School)". Yes. I'll allow that.

"..."

Having stuck her hand into the box silently, Reki drew her first lot, which was "Sorcerer".

In the midst of the entire Baskerville becoming silent, Reki...drew her second lot after looking at the first year girl Mutsu, still not saying anything.

The atmosphere was such that it felt like it was impossible to do a tsukkomi, so nobody did one.

Then, this time, "Chemical Research Lab Staff" came out.

Well...that should be fine, right? That is. She doesn't talk much, so it seems good.

"Fuuu, Haaa..."

Taking deep breaths was Aria, who was extremely bad with dressing up.

Whilst Shirayuki and Riko, who had already entered the safe zone, smirked and looked over her, Aria stuck her hand into the box with an expression which one might have when handling a live bomb...Like pulling out a fuse, *Rustle*...she withdrew a paper.

Aria, putting in your willpower has no effect on lotteries. Well, I can't really talk about other people.

Swallow...Her throat made a sound, and on the opened paper—

"Idol"

Was written.

"I-I-Idol...U-Um, those pretty girls who appear on Japanese TV...?"

Aria, who locked her eyes on the paper even while trembling, was about to break into tears.

'Yes, yes yes,' Shirayuki slightly stooped over and nodded, but at her mouth, there were the dimples which appeared when she was trying not to laugh.

From the side of Riko's mouth, twisted like a cat, (this was also a sign of her trying not to laugh,) a snort escaped. Ah, you drooled a little. Are you really holding yourself back so much?

This is just for example: I also imagined Aria joining AKB48...

He...Hehe...N-no. Don't laugh, me!

Still, don't laugh. I can hold it back. If I laugh, I'll be shot to death.

Rather, no matter what or how they tried to cover up, she'd be the only *junior idol*, right? That is, if Aria did it.

There's a gap between her and real idols.

Furthermore, in my head, the title "Aria-chan 8 years old" appeared, and it reminded about the unfortunate DVD package—

"He...Hem!"

I laughed for an instant, but followed up by covering it with a faked cough.

Was...Was I found out...? I hesitatingly stole a glance at Aria's expression, but...

Performing the rather troublesome thing of self-imagination, Aria appeared to be imagining that she had a performance where she said things like, "Is everyone having fun!?" and her face was really hot and red, as if she had gotten a fever, the type where one's face heats up like an electric heater. As a result, she didn't seem to have noticed my laugh. Thank God. This finished without my death.

Sweat...Sweat Sweat...

A large amount of sweat dripped from her forehead, just like in manga, and Aria—

Spoke with a tone that a soldier who was forced to make a bitter decision might use—

"Ch-Chan-Change...!"

She said, and readied her right hand, braced like a talon—

"Ka-Kanzaki-dono...then, the next one will be definite...!"

If it was something like a bird, then Aria's gaze could definitely kill, and Fuuma shuffled slightly back from her.

Thud!

Aria, who had stuck her hand inside the box with a force which could have broken Fuuma's arm joints, had gotten what for her second lot?

Opening in slow motion, on the paper which Aria's tiny hands were holding...

On the paper...

"Elementary School Student"

Was there.

Ele.

Elementary School Student!

This time, it really is: "Aria-chan 8 years old," isn't it?

A-Aria. You...

What kind of horrible luck is that? Never gamble in your life.

"You did it——! You did it, Aria! By a certain definition, this definitely suits you! Kyahahahahahah!"

Riko, who shouted that, was rolling around at the feet of Aria, who was restraining herself like she had been frozen solid at the moment she saw the three words, "Elementary School Student", and laughing uncontrollably 'Ahyahyahya,' she clutched her stomach.

Was it that Shirayuki had also reached her limit of tolerance? She had knelt down as if prostrating herself, and leaking a noise of laughter which could not be called a voice, she hit the floor with a thudding noise.

I, who stood there shocked at the depths of horror in which Aria's luck resided, also — unintentionally; really, unintentionally — thought about an elementary school student with sharp eyes, sucking on a lollipop and carrying a red backpack—

"Ha—"

I laughed, and at that moment, I noticed the killing intent of Aria, who seemed to have snapped.

In the middle of my brain, the high-impact song "Firestarter" once again started to stream.

Boom!

Aria stuck her hands in the two-sides of her skirt, and drew her Governments!

Th-this is bad! Didn't I say to make sure that your magazines were full this morning!?

"Nothing happened! Nothingnothingnothingnothingnothingnooooooooooooooothing! First, it's the death sentence for you!"

In response to Aria, who had stuck her pistols out, aiming at Fuuma, Riko and I leapt in from the left and right.

"Stop it, Aria, don't shoot! Ranbyou's here! We'll be included and taken care of too!"

"*Aria-chan*, give up! Riko will help you make the costume! Kyahahahahaha!"

"WHO THE HELL IS ARIA-CHAN! A HOLE! HOLE METEOR SHOWER! HOLE BIG BAAAANNNGGGG!"

So, this time it's a series of celestial bodies. There's a lot of them, huh. Hole series, that is.

While thinking that, I protected Fuuma, crying while scattering caltrops behind her and running away, from the barrel of Aria's gun. Even though she's like that, she's still my junior, my Amica.

Continuing to go wild even though her first target had escaped her, Aria was in vicious brat mode. You drew this yourself, so resign yourself to it. This is nothing more than a childish tantrum.

Just like Riko had said, by a certain definition, this is a really fitting role. "Elementary School Student", that is.

"DIE! DIE! DIEDIEDIEDIEEVERYONEDIE! IF EVERYONE WHO SAW THIS DIES, IT'D BE LIKE THIS NEVER HAPPENS! Gurk!"

Shirayuki put Aria, who was screaming those words, into a Nelson, Riko and I desperately pinned the guns on the left and right, Reki had run outside the sports hall at some point in time, and was now sticking half of her head out of the cover of the bulletproof door, staring this way. Reki, if you knew how things were going to go, then gives us a warning before this actually happened!

From then on, Butei High entered a shortened class for a while, and the preparations for the culture festival went on.

As for Aria...other than being forced to take a consecutive 30 german suplexes from Ranbyou up until she said "Please let me be an elementary school student,' she was not attacked by anybody.

The people from 'Deen': Jeanne, Meiya, and Tamamo didn't appear, let alone the enemy...which is to say, 'Grenada'.

The ambassadors to the Bandire who stayed by Aria's side were Reki and I.

It's ominous that I don't know anything about what those guys are doing, but besides the fact that the following days were completely safe, I...couldn't really do anything, and as a result had nothing to do. After all, safe things are by nature good things.

Furthermore, there was one more thing, relevant to my safety, for which I was thankful for...

For some reason, it seemed that Aria was in a good mood. Recently, that is.

This was a trend which I had seen since giving her a ring last month, but ever since the incident with the clot mark on her neck, the number of times she had fired at me had reduced.

Simultaneously, I also felt that the number of times that Aria had had fights with Shirayuki and Riko had decreased. As for this...rather than getting along better, it felt as if she had developed some sort of tolerance. I also felt that she was taking things from other points of view far more than she had up till now.

I had thought that the reduction of the Golden Shell had taken effect, leading up to some sort of hormone imbalance, but because this trend was something which I had seen directly after I gave her a ring for her birthday, I felt that it was unrelated.

I really...don't understand girls.

—It was part of the rules that the costumes for 'Ristorante Masque', which we had decided by drawing lots the other day, had to be prepared by oneself.

The deadline was set to be at a date quite a long while before the culture festival, but...

If the costumes weren't finished by the time of the deadline, one would be subjected to the full punishment course proffered by the celebrities of Butei,

This was truly a matter of life and death, so everyone would somehow do something to make the deadline.

Therefore, it became a tradition of sorts that everyone would gather in a classroom the night before the deadline and spend all night finishing up.

On the night that this 'meeting to finish up' took place...at nine o'clock.

In the classroom where I was, with a paper bag with a police uniform inside, 5 or 6 teams had gathered and were making conversation while finishing their costumes.

The desks had been kept to the back of the room, and each team had set up a picnic sheet, sat down, and worked.

Because there were people who were already wearing their almost-finished costumes, it had the feeling of a costume party of sorts.

There were those who had brought in small speakers, and were streaming music into the room.

Looking around, Shirayuki and Reki were in a corner, and Haimaki, whose popularity was rising due to commercials by SoftBank, was sitting there as well.

(...?)

Come to think of it...what's with this zone here by the wall, partitioned off from the rest of the room by a screen?

As I thought that and tried to have a look inside, the noise of rustling clothes and—

"Sooo, what kind of guys are you into, Hayakawa-san?"

"Hmmm, I'm...about that...probably somebody that's a bit dark..."

"Who from our class? Come on, tell us!"

—things like that could be heard from within, so I took a step back with a force that rivaled the me in Hysteria Mode.

Is this...a changing room!?

In the small gap at the foot of the screen, fallen skirts could be seen...

These...these goddamn Butei girls, they don't even know the concept of shame!

I get the fact there has to be a place where people can change from their uniforms into their costumes, but don't set up a changing room in this kinda place! It's just asking for trouble.

I can guess from the level of business around, but tensions were high, maybe because we were gathered in a classroom at night? At this kind of time, I need to be more alert of girls' gossiping than ever.

"Kinji, that isn't the best position."

Just as I was wiping away my cold sweat, Mutou, in a fireman outfit, put his arm on my shoulder.

"Over here. From this angle, if you look hard enough, the figure of the girls are thinly visible. Keep your focus. If you do this, you can delight in their silhouettes!"

Mutou whispered that into my ear as he circled around the screen.

"I-I'm not interested in that sort of thing, or rather, get to work!"

I shook myself free, and made my escape towards Team Baskerville.

But...what? Did he say silhouette?

Use your focus on something else, won't you? Like studying. You failed modern literature, didn't you?

"Um, Kin-chan. How far along are you on your uniform?"

A female teacher—Shirayuki, wearing a white blouse with a tight thigh-length dark navy skirt, said.

Cleaning up the space next to her, she cleared a space for me to sit.

Her tone...and feeling, they all feel teacher-like. She's serious even when it comes to roleplaying.

She was obeying the notice from Masters which said: "While wearing the costumes used for Ristoranted Masque inside the classroom, students have to act out their role for at least one hour after entering the classroom, to practice," wasn't she?

"It's nearly done. Could you look at it after to check that there's nothing off?"

"Of course. Hehe...I'm somewhat looking forward to it. What Kin-chan looks like as a patrolman."

Shirayuki, wearing black-rimmed glasses, looked up to me and smiled...a teacher's costume really suits her.

She's had a rather adult body from the beginning after all...she really seems like a new teacher.

She's overflowing with motherly traits, so she feels more like an elementary school teacher.

(About that...if Aria and Riko came, it'd really be like an elementary school, huh.)

...After glancing at Hiraga's back (also like an elementary school student), as she sat upright in a chair with Mutou's supply-type group, Carrier GA, sewing cloth embroidered with gold-thread....I sat down.

And the police costume which I took out of the paper bag...was actually just something made nearly completed that I had bought.

Coincidentally, buying costumes was something that was frowned upon, but because it wasn't against the rules, it's done a lot. People who make their costumes from scratch like Shirayuki are rare indeed.

And the creation/retail of those clothes was handled by the girls of CVR.

They, who close in on criminal groups through so-called 'seduction', also learn how to seduce the other sex through clothing, so they can make any sort of clothing without trouble. There are students who dress as males, so they take orders for male clothing as well.

Because I really had no desire to go and directly negotiate with that squadron of beautiful girls, I ordered through a mail, just like buying it online, but...at this kind of time...Those damned girls

stared at the ground as they overcharged me.

However, though it's expensive, the clothing is real. There shouldn't be a problem with this.

But, in regards to Ristorante Masque, it was written on a printout from Masters that: "It is forbidden for real things, such as stains and damages, to not be present."

If one's uniform isn't approved, one is sent to the full course, so I rubbed the new uniform, giving it a sense of being worn, and I pulled on the badge, widening the pinhole, occupying myself with the fine details.

"K-Kin-chan, what...what do you think of my teacher costume? Is there...anything strange?"

Shirayuki, who was shaving away at the edge of the attendance clipboard with a file, turned to face this way and asked me a question, so...

While trying not to look at that massive chest which stuck out—

"—It suits you. You seem like an elementary school teacher."

I answered her vaguely, looking at her out of the corner of my eye.

With that, Shirayuki smiled a love-filled smile...apparently trying to hide it, she suddenly crouched down, as if she was kowtowing.

And she was saying: "Tohyama-kun, this won't do...we're teacher and student...but, if we overcome that barrier...if it's a secret...i-it's fine, you know...?"

What kind of barrier is Hotogi-sensei overcoming all by herself? I've no idea what she means.

Or rather, when acting as a teacher, you really say 'Tohyama-kun', just like you should.

I've been saying this from the morning of our opening ceremony, but keep doing that and please stop with 'Kin-chan'.

(Well...)

I got tired of working really quickly.

I'm really bad at this kind of thing...this kind of simple work, that is.

I had gotten a bit distracted...

(Come to think of it, when it comes to being on campus at night—this is the first time since being sniper restricted by Reki.)

While continuing to work, I looked Reki's way.

"..."

Reki, who was set to play a 'Researcher', was wearing a white coat above her uniform, was sitting, and was sewing together a light-green blouse.

She was in the exact same position as she was when I entered. She hadn't moved even a millimeter.

"..."

Reki's the type of person to never get tired of simple tasks, huh. To do things that everybody doesn't like indifferently, and forever. I really wish she'd share some of that ability with me.

—I took the sleeve of her blouse, looking at her handiwork and...woah.

The stitching was accurate to the point where it looked like it was sewn by a machine.

Her personality really shows when you make her do this kind of work.

Reki's also extremely attentive when it comes to being a sniper. She's persistent in her sniper restriction, she hates firing recklessly, and she even modified her Dragunov so that she could reload unused bullets back into the magazine from the chamber.

In front of the knees that very same Reki, the perfectionist...a pair of rimless glasses was prepared, almost like she was trying to imitate reality in a very...Reki-like manner.

I took them in my hands and sat them on Reki's nose...and even then, she didn't move an inch.

Hey, have a little bit of a reaction.

So I thought to myself, when she looked up at me through the gap above the lenses of the glasses.

Uu.

This is...the exhibition of the technique the glasses (girl) loving Mutou had talked about, 'looking up while letting the glasses droop down'. He'd said something like 'The destructive power of that is seriously awesome,' but only now do I understand what he meant.

What on Earth is this. I can feel the Hysteria bloodflow, even if just a little.

When combined with Reki, it becomes a dangerous object. I should take it off.

And I'll have to be alert against the glasses that Hotogi-sensei is wearing, as well as the pair that Jeanne wears occasionally.

Haaah...glasses...that was truly unexpected. This world is filled with dangerous things. Dangerous for me, that is.

As I was doing this and that, Riko, dressed as a cowboy, came and shouted "Good morning everyone!"

Why would you say 'good morning'? It's 10:00 PM right now.

So I thought, but asking Riko the meaning of her announcements is like asking a chimpanzee why it's making noise (an interesting but pointless exercise), so I decided not to. In any case it's probably some form of 1337speak or something.

It seems like Riko's already finished with her costume—

She was wearing a ten-gallon hat, and a blouse made of unbleached cloth came together in front of her chest, leaving her belly button completely exposed.

She was also wearing leather boots and a leather vest, as well as a miniskirt made of denim, with strings of leather hanging from its hem like noodles. It was really detailed work.

Rather, she had even changed her guns to antique-like revolvers, but would she be alright armed like that?

Putting aside my uneasiness, Riko was grinning and standing in front of the door to the classroom—

"C'mon, hurry up! You'll definitely be suuuuper popular! Cuteness is justice!"

—and she was pulling on someone, who was beyond the door and couldn't be seen.

"~~~~~~~~~~~~~"

The legs of that person, who seemed to be shouting at a pitch higher than that of a person's hearing range, were being dragged in and...they came into view.

Accompanying red strap-shoes...were socks striped pink and white. There were even white frills attached to the upper edge of the socks.

Sectioning peoples' clothing and memorising them: 'Dress Scan', was something that had become a habit through Inquesta.

We'll definitely be accepting, so show it to us. *Miss Elementary School Student.*

"I-I-I knew it! I DOOOOOOOOOON'T WAAAAAAAAANT TOOOOOOOOOO!"

Aria, who was wearing a kids' size blouse with buttons on near the top of her left and right chest (this also had big frills on its lower hem,) and a skirt which was so small as to be stupid, was struggling against Riko with a force which threatened to dislocate her wrist joints.

It seemed like she wasn't wearing the push-up bra she normally had on, and it was clearly an A...no, AA-size. There, the reality of her being an elementary school student is at its pinnacle.

Aria-chan (8 years old) had finally become completely visible, and she was wearing a red satchel covered in pink. On the satchel's left side was a holder for a soprano recorder.

The detail of the design. Riko made this costume. Probably.

To guard against the possibility of any holes, I had done a week of image training of the Aria as a schoolgirl, and also practiced resisting laughter, but if I saw the squirming Aria any more, I'd burst out laughing, so—

"Aria, give up. If you don't finish making the details of your costume, then Ranbyou'll drag you around town on her bike as

punishment. In those clothes. He-Hem."

At the end, the laughter which would have spelled my self-destruct leaked out, but I hid it with the 'coughing gesture' which I had mastered.

After I said those words with a straight face, smoke started coming out of the top of Aria's head like a wire had short-circuited, and even as she continued looking down...

She staggered over here like Koko — Meimei using drunken fist, and she tottered down, sitting cross-legged, next to me.

In response to Aria, who had sat right next to me...

For an instant I felt Shirayuki glare with eyes like blades, so I glanced at her, but...Shirayuki was smiling gently as always.

S-Seems like that was just a hallucination or something, because of my tired eyes. I've probably been doing too much detail work.

Rubbing my eyes and looking at Aria—a nametag with: 'Year 4 Class 2: Kanzaki Aria' written on it was stuck on the right side of her satchel. Her designation as being in 4th grade of elementary school once again hit the mark, and I once again had to fake a cough.

"Hem...Autumn's a season where the air's just starting to dry up...Almost feels like I've caught a cold."

My voice trembling with the laughter that was swelling up, I announced how it felt like I had a cold.

Aria, who was already completely red, glared up at me as if to say: "If you dare laugh, I'll blow a hole in you."

Even her cheeks were puffed out, she really is an elementary school student.

"Hey! Aria-chan! The sewing box is over here! Aria-chan!"

Aria grit her teeth and clutched at her skirt.

Clenching both her hands with all her might...she must be trying to resist her frustration.

"You...you must really want to say 'Aria-chan', but...!"

An index finger made contact with the Aria's forehead, just as she was speaking in a voice dripping with venom.

With a smile as warm as sunshine, Shirayuki-sensei poked her.

"You can't do that, Aria-chan. Elementary school students can't talk with that kind of tone."

She's talking about Masters' order, the one hour of 'acting out your costume'.

"...Uguuu...!"

"Right, and then, when we're lent tools, we have to say thank you, right?"

Looking closely, the index finger that Shirayuki-san's putting between Aria's eyebrows...isn't its fingernail outstretched?

I noticed only because Aria was sliding away from me like she was trying get away, but Shirayuki's putting an enormous amount of power into her finger.

Aria, who had to act like an elementary school student because of the rules...

"...I'll remember..."

I was thinking that she had spoken with a voice which sound like it had been groaned out from the back of her throat...

The muscles in her face twitched, her face forming an expression that looked like a saber-toothed tiger was forcing a smile.

And as the smoke from the magma of the shame and rage that swirled inside her body spilled out of her mouth...

"...Y-Yes! Fank you very much! Sensei!"

She widened her camellia coloured eyes and shouted at Shirayuki.

Twitch!

The veins on Aria's forehead—did it really become that shape inside her?—stood out as a 'D'.

"...!"

To my eyes, it looked like the 'D' in 'Die'.

Could it be that somewhere on Aria's body, her veins were standing out in shapes 'I' and 'E'? And when we put them together...

G—G...God that's scary! The hell is this new system!

At this killing intent, even the fearless armed Miko-san who's picking on Aria has pulled away.

Riko the cowboy has even fallen backwards, and is crawling back.

I secretly lifted up D-mode ON — Aria's pink skirt, inconspicuously checking that there weren't any guns in the holsters by her thighs.

"A-Aria, there's no need to act. Let's just do our work. Alright?"

Remembering that Aria had once boasted about how she had bested

a grizzly bear with her bare hands, I desperately tried to cool down the nuclear reactor on the edge of meltdown.

Damn it. Butei High is hell. Since this is a peaceful event, just making costumes, why does my lifespan have to be shortened like this?

And you, Reki. When did you disappear like smoke along with Haimaki. Again.

That goddamn intuition. Afterwards, Officer Tohyama's going to file a complaint and arrest you.

At around 11:00 PM, everybody had finished their own costumes...

We had decided that everyone going home would bring three desks from the back of the classroom and return them to their original place, so the scene inside the classroom gradually returned to normal.

Professor Reki, the human watch, had also said 'It is time to sleep,' and had went home. Shirayuki-sensei went home to do student council work, and Aria-chan tottered home with an unsteady gait.

(Alright...I should be just about done too.)

Somehow...it feels like though he's young, this police officer has no motivation whatsoever.

I had rented the S&W M360 which has recently been used by police from Amdo, but when I try holding it—it's light, and it's built durably. Quite a good gun. I quite like it.

Looking around while in my police uniform, only a few people were left.

And coincidentally, all of those people were girls. Ugh. It's about time for me to head off.

...But...

The activity of the culture festival—'Ristorante Masque'...the preparations for it are just about finished.

There were incidents, and it was pretty troublesome, but making preparations with everyone gathered like this...it wasn't boring.

I'm in the second year of high school, so I can only experience preparing for a culture festival in high school once more.

Thinking that, I felt myself settle into a slightly sentimental mood. (Though it isn't in my nature.)

The remnants of Baskerville were I, who was slow and bad with his work, and—Riko the Cowboy, who apparently liked the atmosphere here or something and was reading Young Gangan.

Mutou's team was only left with one person.A girl wearing a sparkling slim dress, and with limestone pasted to her phone...Ah. Is that Hiraga-san? She wasn't in her uniform, and her hair, which was normally always done up, was untied and had been pushed up, so for a moment I had no idea who that was.

I'll take this opportunity. I'd asked Hiraga-san to do something for me, and there's something I've ordered from her, so I guess I'll talk to her a bit.

"Hiraga-san."

I squatted down next to her, still in my police uniform—

"Ah, Officer Tohyama!"

Spin.

Hiraga-san turned back.

"—!?"

She had put on makeup so thick I couldn't even see her skin.

"I'm Ayaya! Thank you for stopping by!"

Thick foundation, eye shadow applied such that she looked like a panda...she was also wearing fake eyelashes, and so her eyes looked like kirins' eyes...what the hell is that?

"Are you...a ghost?"

"Officer Tohyama! This is a cover girl! You're pretty handsome, so it'll be cheap!"

Hiraga-san opened a lottery slip with 'Charisma Cover Girl' written on it with both hands, and fluttered the heavy-looking eyelashes of both her eyes. Did she think that was a wink? Another fail...

(Rather, for this girl to be a hostess...that shop's committing a crime, isn't it...)

Hiraga-san's also bad at drawing lots. In an opposite manner to Aria. She had drawn a role which fitted herself not at all. It does seem like she really likes it though.

"Waah! Ayaya's so cute!"

In response to Riko, who had for some reason dived in (literally), cover girl Ayaya...was praised.

"Ehehe. Welcome—! Crack open the champagne!!"

Don Don Don Don Don Perignon—!

Looking at Riko and Hiraga-san, who had started singing as they waved their hands around like they were cheering, I already felt like saying 'that's enough'. Hiraga-san's definitely going to receive some corporal punishment after this. Amuamidabutsu.

"Ah...by the way, Hiraga-san, thanks for your work. You really helped clear up the debris of the...tank-like thing on Empty Island."

I called out to her from the side, and Hiraga-san...

"Officer! I'm the one who should be saying thank you. That stuff we salvaged make really good materials. Was it really alright for me to take everything?"

"Yeah. It'd be pretty dangerous if that stuff was found. Well putting that aside, that thing that I had ordered..."

I looked to the water, and Hiraga-san said "Aha! I'm half done!" and pulled from a fabulous Chanel handbag—

"I finally sewed on the emblem tonight, which is why I was left here."

—one black glove.

Ooh. So it'll look like this.

I put it on my right hand, and...it fit perfectly.

As expected of Hiraga-san.

'The fabric portion is formed of TNK wire, so its structure is such that even if your hand takes an impact, the energy'll be dispersed. Until the second joint of the index and middle finger, the interior—is prepared with the superhard alloy carbonized tungsten cobalt coated with nitrated titanium. Its name is Python!"

—It may be a glove, but it's an open fingered glove.

All the fingertips are exposed, and for the pinky and ring finger, the entire finger is—the index finger and middle finger is slightly longer, going up to the second joint—bulletproof fabric also covers the glove up until the first joint. Half of the thumb is covered.

It's slightly unbalanced, but it's fine. Just like I ordered.

But, I had left the design to her, but...it's really too cool. It feels like it's futuristic, like it's from a sci-fi movie. There's a Butei High emblem on the back of the hand, and that looks like it's from an anime.

(But, well...it's fine.)

If I told her to do it again, she'd charge me extra.

And it's not something I just show people either.

This is—the open fingered glove I ordered after the battle with the Koko sisters. For the sake of protecting my fingers.

Normally, gloves that contain metal like this—'slid knuckle', is constructed for use in hand to hand combat, but in my case, it was constructed to use 'Slash'.

'Slash' is a dangerous technique that uses the index fingers and middle fingers of both hands to enclose a bullet coming my way, changing its trajectory slightly, just so that it won't hit me—

Before, I had done it with my bare hands and had learned my lesson, so I requested its design.

Well...I'd like to be spared from vicious battles where I'm forced into a position where I'm made to need to use 'slash' though. 'Grenada' and 'Deen' haven't moved at all, but far east warfare...was that it? It seems like I'm being drawn into this and that, and because of that I don't know when and who will attack.

Even the thought of being able to fight on par with those monsters with this is painful, but there's nothing for me to do but prepare in my own way. As much as I can within the limits of a normal high school student.

"Ahh, with this—it's fine. There're no problems. Just that there's no point for this if I don't have both gloves. I'll be leaving the left hand to you."

"Of course I'll make the left hand just as you ordered, but...when you get both, what'll you use it for?"

"...Trade secret."

I gave an answer that wasn't an answer to the charisma hostess-san who had asked.

In any case, even if I told her, she wouldn't believe me.

"By the way...why did you name the glove Python?"

'Officer Tohyama! Flex your hand, try opening and closing it!"

Since Hiraga-san said to, I did as she said, and...

The metal shell attached to the interior of the two fingers clicked together, making a pleasant sound.

"Look! Your fingers look like a snake opening and closing its mouth!"

I, who had been made to do something so stupid, was stupefied...

Riko had seen my Python from the side, and her eyes started to shine.

"That's soooooo cooooool! Super cool! Give it to Riko! Give it, give iiiiiiitt!"

"H-Hey! Let go of my hand! It won't fit your hand!"

'Hey, Officer Tohyama. Once you get both gloves, what can they be used for? Tell me, tell me, tell meeee."

Riko, who seemed to have taken a liking to the anime-like design of my gloves, and Hiraga-san, who was stubbornly continuing to ask, grabbed onto my sleeves from both sides.

T-This is an impossible scene.

An officer in uniform is getting entangled with a cowboy and a hostess. Even in Tarantino's films, which have a lot of absurd scenes, nothing like this ever happens. Rather, this is more like a scene from a comedy.

In the changing corner, I changed into my school uniform from the police costume...

"Kinji."

Riko, who had changed before me, called out to me from beyond the screen.

Seeing as she had called me 'Kinji' rather than "Ki-kun'...this was the

'Inner Riko'.

"What is it?"

"Are you going to make that a normal move? You're slowly leaving behind what it means to be human."

...That's just like Riko.

Just by seeing Python, she knew its use.

—She's talking about the move she saw just once at Tokyo station, 'Slash'.

"Leaving humanity behind? If you're the one telling me that, I guess it's all over for me."

I answered from the other side of the screen, and Riko chuckled—

"Riko-chan, your friend's calling for you, you know? Someone with the same sort of clothes, kind of frilly and western. It seems like they aren't from this school."

"Alriiight! Someone not from this school...?"

A classmate from outside the classroom called her name, and Riko returned to 'Surface Riko' and answered.

Just like that, Riko left the classroom...

...

Mm...?

Somehow, it seems like the girls are moving out of the classroom?

Having finished changing, I exited the changing zone—

Ah. Damn it. Fuck my life.

There was no one left in the classroom, and there were still a few desks against the back.

Those bastards. They gave up on cleaning up and went home. Are they telling me to do it?

I don't know whose it is, but someone had forgotten the amplifier they brought in here. The MP3 player's also just lying there. It's fine because it's quiet piano music, but the sound was still on too. Seriously.

There weren't any witnesses, so I thought I'd just head out too, but...

If I don't clean up, I'll be lynched tomorrow when they go on the hunt for the culprit. The girls'll just come together on this one. If that happens, my internal report'll take a hit, and my plan to transfer to a normal school will also be affected.

So, alone in the classroom in the middle of the night...I carried desks, with piano music in the background.

"Just...a little bit more."

I took a desk, and looked up—

"?"

Rustle.

At the edge of the door, a pink string...or rather, Aria's twin tails were visible.

She hid her head, but couldn't hide her tails.

The hem of the skirt of the sailor uniform she had apparently changed into was also visible.

She always tries to hide like that. Exhibiting the fine skills that belong to every S-rank Butei.

"What're you doing, Aria?"

I called out to her, and Aria started for a moment..then entered the classroom.

I thought that she had gone straight home and went to sleep, but she came back? Did she forget something?

"What am I doing? I don't really know, but...you weren't coming back."

Aria dipped her head a bit, muttering: 'Reki's sleeping and Shirayuki's doing work...I couldn't connect to Riko's phone either." Afterward, she looked up at me, almost like she was peeking.

"Then, maybe Kinji's still in the classroom...or so I thought, and you were here."

"...? I don't really get it, but you're just in time. Help me out."

"...I should be the one asking, why're you doing this all alone?"

"Why? No idea. Help me out."

Saying it twice, Aria walked over...with a small noise, she helped me take one.

Now that I think about it, something like this happened during our summer vacation. Aria appeared when I was cleaning up.

"Guess there's no helping it. The reason why I was worried was because of this."

Aria sat on the desk that she had carried, and she looked at me, still carrying the remaining desks, with relieved eyes.

It seems like she's in a good mood, but...you're just going to help me carry one desk?

Well, it's better than nothing.

The classroom returned to normal.

Looking at the clock, the date was about to change.

Finally, I went over to the amplifier that I had left, and I tried to

switch off the sound—

"Isn't...that fine just as it is?"

Aria was looking at the window—and the veranda in the Year 2 Class A classroom.

"Why? If we leave it on until morning, it'll be a waste of electricity."

"That's not what I mean. Just...um. Let's take a break, is what I'm saying. You're slow."

A break? You only took one desk.

And though it's Friday, it's pretty late already. I want to go back and go to sleep, but...

If I say something against my lady's will, I'll be sentenced to death.

"...If that's what you meant, then say so."

I swallowed my complaints and pulled out someone's chair, going to sit, but—

With movements which suggested that she had just decided on something, Aria put her hand on the slide door leading to the veranda.

"The veranda. The boys were in it all day, so I hadn't gone out. I'm going."

Her back still towards me, Aria opened the door and stepped out onto the veranda.

My master had just said 'I'm going,' so that means 'Come too, slave.'

If I hang back, then the guns'll leave their holsters, so I also went out to the veranda...

I looked over at Daiba, on the other side of Tokyo Bay, lights still on and sparkling.

The observation vehicle in Bullet Town was still lit up, and it

looked like thin oval lights from here.

"...It's beautiful."

"Yeah."

It's the Daiba I've always seen, but this is probably the first time I've seen it from the classroom veranda and in the middle of the night.

(Rather...)

I noticed only after coming, but this veranda has a pretty good atmosphere.

It'd be nice if I was a lone, but when with a girl...you want to take a break in this kind of romantic place? This is troubling for me, you know.

"..."

"..."

From the amplifier in the classroom, the piano music could be faintly heard—it mingled with the sounds of the surf of Tokyo Bay, and in contrast, highlighted the silence. It feels like a scene from a movie.

It even felt like only Aria and I were floating in the middle of the darkness.

Now, the feeling of it being only the two of us increased.

This...this is awkward.

Leaning on the handrail with her elbows, Aria's hands (it seems like her elbows didn't reach) went to the same handrail. I glanced in her direction, and...

Aria was glancing this way at exactly the same time, so our eyes met.

The timing the two of us took to avert our gazes was exactly the

same.

Ah...what is this.

We're completely synchronized...that's a problem.

It seemed like we thought the same way, and so things were becoming increasingly awkward.

"... ..."

"... ..."

U-Um.

This is weird.

Normally, Aria loves to talk, and there'd never be such an interruption in the conversation. It's strange.

Glance...

I looked Aria's way, and again, she looked at me.

Our eyes met again, and once more, we averted our gazes simultaneously.

Ahh...what the hell is this.

This has become really troubling.

In other words, um, we both...seem to be *aware of each other*.

"... ... ..."

"... ... ..."

The wind direction changed, and Aria's bittersweet gardenia scent reached me.

Damn it. A topic. A topic. Isn't there anything?

I had become panicked because of the feminine scent, and I couldn't

think of anything.

Can't a UFO or something fly pass?

"Ahhhhhh, um. What's that?"

—*Point.*

Aria stretched her arms out, and pointed at the horizon.

Seeing as the way she's talking seems to be pretty forced, it seems like she was looking for a topic as well.

"Mm? Where?"

I...also spoke a little forcedly, looking at the direction Aria was pointing.

"Um, it looks like a super high tower. It's dark though."

"Ahhh...that's the Sky Tree."

"Sky Tree...?"

Tilt.

Aria looked over here with her camellia colored eyes. It seems like she doesn't know about it.

"You don't know about the Sky Tree?"

"What on Earth is that? It's weird English. I don't know it."

Aria shook her head, her twin-tails shaking as well.

"You...stop watching BBC all the time and watch the Japanese news too. Well, I may say that, but I don't really know much about it myself...but, I know that it's a radio tower. It's being built, so it's only finished up to the second observation platform."

"Oh....?"

Thinking about it, the Sky Tree...is pretty much done.

According to the news, it's now 450m high. It seems like it's about 70% finished.

When it's finished, will I...still be in Butei High?

When it's finished, Aria will...

For a while longer, the two of us stayed silent, looking at the faraway Sky Tree—finally, Aria opened her rose pink lips.

"Today...well, I don't really want to think about that elementary school student costume...but it was fun. I had fun. Doing things like that to prepare for a culture festival, it was fun."

"—Yeah. I also had fun. Well, it's finished though."

"I wonder how many times I'll have a night like that in my life?"

"In your life? A few times, right? Until now, there've been a few times."

"No. There definitely won't be that many. This was my first time."

"Your first...?"

"In the London and Rome Butei High, I was an *aria*. I mostly cancelled this kind of work, and even if I did it, I did it alone. Actually, I was thinking about not going and doing my work alone, but...you...were here."

"...I was?"

"H-huh? That's not it, that's...Um, Riko. I was dragged here by Riko."

"A-Ahh. Now that you mention it, that did happen. Well, whatever the case...coming here and working with everyone...wasn't it nice?"

"T-That's right. That's why I want to treasure that time...this time..."

I see.

Aria wants memories of school life, even if she's in a school like

this.

Ever since she was small, she's been with adults, and was working at the London Butei division...so events like this, as a student, are fresh. She must've been happy.

"...If only this day would continue on forever. When I wake up tomorrow, it'd be this morning....Taking lessons, eating lunch, preparing for the culture festival...that would continue."

In response to Aria, who was jokingly talking about that science fiction-like scenario, I laughed softly.

"And at night, I'd return to the classroom...I'd find you, and I'd carry one desk. Afterward, the two of us would go out onto the veranda—and do this..."

Aria spoke, and looked up at me—

I reflexively turned to face her, and when I looked into her face from such a close distance...

Aria's eyes were smiling—Aah...

—How do I say this?

In any case, she was beautiful.

I'd never be able to say it, but she was beautiful.

I was enraptured by that sight, like I was being sucked in.

"..."

After coming this far...the strength of her eyes—a figure of speech like that doesn't quite fit.

An artist with skills so amazing such as to be comparable to God created a beautiful girl who belonged to an ideal world.

And she was given life, and started walking.

I...felt that way. About Aria.

(...?)

Rather...

Normally, she's cute enough as she is, but she looks even more beautiful than that tonight.

Ah. She's—it's thin, but she's wearing makeup. Damn. What was that I was saying about God?

"...Did you put on makeup? You weren't wearing any when making your costume."

I said, and Aria—

"!"

—showed off her super blushing technique.

She started a series of panicked gestures which looked like she was grabbing onto an invisible meteor shower of candy.

"T-That's—that's, that's because, tonight's a date."

"D-Date?"

"—Eh!?"

Aria's camellia colored eyes went completely round, and she stiffened.

No, no, you shouldn't be saying 'Eh!?' right? You're the one who said it. I'm the one who should be going 'Eh!?'

Anyways, this is just going out to the classroom veranda.

I've never heard of a date with a total distance of 1 meter.

"Th-that's not...what I mean by a d-date is—it's just a comparison!"

She opened her mouth wide and shouted at me, so...

"I-I got it. I understand. Don't open your mouth like that. I can see

all the way inside."

I tried to calm her down.

What is it this time? She suddenly hid her mouth with both of her hands, looking this way just with her eyes.

"...What's wrong, Aria?"

"Nyothing."

"Why're you suddenly talking like a cat."

"...Don't stare so much. At my...um...next to my incisors..."

Ah. Her canines?

"What's wrong with your canines? Did they extend or something?"

"..."

Remembering the night that Aria had been bitten by a vampire, I asked seriously.

"Huh? There's no way they'd extend, right? Are you an idiot? Um...it's a complex of mine. These teeth."

"Why? They're like a cat's—and um, well...by common sense, they'd be cute, wouldn't they?"

"Cu...cu-cute? You think so? Isn't that stupid?"

"Um, that's why—I said 'by common sense'. As an extremely normal Japanese guy, it's normal to think that way."

I spoke, a little redundantly, and Aria's expression looked like she was thinking...

"In the Christian faith, that isn't so. The devils in religious paintings have this kind of teeth, so...they're made fun of as 'devil teeth'. It was gossiped about a lot in Rome Butei High."

She was saying it sadly, so...

"Then, stay in Japan forever."

I said as consolation...

Accompanying her specialty, the blushing technique, Aria also exhibited her petrification technique.

Just by being told to 'Stay in Japan forever' by me...why did she turn to stone?

Aria, who was creaking like a robot without enough oil, muttered in some English I didn't understand: "Why are you saying such proposal-like words so calmly?"

"You really...ignored all the steps...!"

Lifting the ban on showing her canines immediately, Aria glared up at me.

Really...what've you been talking about this whole time, Aria-san...

I feel like I've seen all of your human emotions at this point.

"—You know. The truth is, there's something that I wanted to say to you!"

"What is it..."

"You're a boy who's really weird with his steps."

Steps?

Had I danced in front of Aria?

"My father had said to 'be careful of boys who ignore the steps'...so after you did weird stuff to me in the PE warehouse, I was wary, but...nobles can't pass over the steps when it comes to *that*. We're not animals after all. T-That thing before...my neck...I mean..."

Neck...?

Ahh. The blood clot on her neck.

Now that I think about it, Aria's convinced that that was me who did that.

I don't really understand, but it seems that she's angry about that.

"I'm sorry for hurting you."

It would be weird to start talking about Hilda now, so I'll just say that.

I made an expression which said: 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again,' and...

Aria's expression grew slightly panicked.

"Ah, no. You don't have to give in like that. It seems like I was drunk, so I don't really remember...I'm not really getting worked up about it."

Please don't. It actually wasn't me.

"Also, you had the resolve to do even something like that, so...I'll forgive you for that. It's forgiven. But! You have to follow the steps properly after this!"

So, these steps have appeared again.

I don't know what's allowed or expected of me according to these 'steps', but seeing as Aria's talking in a way that's masking a more direct expression...it seems like it's a term related to 'male-female relationships'. I know that much.

Most likely...a normal guy would be able to understand the meaning behind Aria's words.

After all, it's something that Aria can talk about, though she's bad with such things.

—But, I...

Because I hate Hysteria Mode, I avoided girls entirely.

And extremely stubbornly too. I avoided them on purpose. For as long as I can remember.

That's why...I can't really understand anything to do with 'boy-girl relationships.'

Even though I'm being talked to about it, I don't understand, and I don't really understand what's interesting about the drama in romance.

So, I...

"..."

Averted my eyes, feeling a little depressed.

I'm sorry, Aria. It seems like you're talking about something earnestly, but...

I don't understand what you mean.

Even so, I feel like it would be rude to ask about and have her meticulously explain every detail about these 'steps'.

After all, I'm in the wrong for being so naive as to not be able to understand, and it feels there's some sort of desperation in Aria's actions...so...I'll just play along for now. Even if I don't understand.

"Yeah, I've got it. I'll be careful. I'll follow the steps properly. That should be fine, right?"

"Ah...y-yeah. So, um, this. I-I was happy about your feelings, but..."

Aria stuck her left hand out and let me see.

"...?"

"The ring. I'm not going to wear it yet."

Ahh.

The ring I gave her for her birthday, huh.

It's your choice whether to put it on or not.

"...Did you not like it? I'm sorry if you didn't. I don't have much sense in these things."

"N-No! Nonono!"

Aria shook her head at a speed where she looked like Ashura, with multiple heads.

And looking at me again...

"That's not it. It's just that I'm not wearing it *yet*. I-I'm not going to return it. I've already sent it to a Swiss bank. Carefully too."

"It's fine if you don't give it back."

I smiled wryly, and Aria blushed at my words—

"But...but that ring was skipping steps. About a hundred of them. I didn't sleep and thought about it for three days, but in the end I concluded that it's way too early for us. So...I won't wear it yet. However...um, even so...you remembered my birthday really well."

"That's...I *am* the leader of Baskerville. It's one of my duties to know about the members of my group."

"'Duty'...? Then, do you know the birthdays of the other members? Shirayuki's or Riko's, or maybe Reki's?"

"Ah...I don't know precisely."

I spoke honestly, and Aria's expression relaxed into one that seemed to express: 'I've won'. Won what?

And for a while after that, her eyes flickered, as if wondering whether or not to ask me something. And after...

"...Hey, then...could I ask you something else?

"That's fine. I don't really have anything to hide."

Other than Hysteria Mode.

"Um...er...Kinji. U-Until now...have you had a girlfriend?"

Huh?

Wh-what the hell?...she's continuing this hateful line of conversation.

"No."

"You're lying. After all you're pretty popular, aren't you?"

"Like hell. My nickname's 'introvert', you know? Zero. Zero girlfriends. Don't ask about something that you don't even need to ask about."

My mouth in a '∧' shape like that of Star Wars' clone troopers, I answered, and—

Aria slipped into a shy, loose smile.

What? She's making fun of me.

"What about you?"

"Eh?"

I fired off the same question, counterattacking—

Since Aria is Aria, she frowned in a '∧' like Darth Vader's.

"—I've been saying this since the beginning. I've not had any romances with anybody. None. I was always thinking about Mama..."

I see...it seems like I asked something bad.

"Sorry. Just responding in kind—"

"Th-That's alright. Mama's high court trial is next week, and she's definitely innocent. The prosecutor's also said that he won't appeal if she's innocent. Japan's laws are modified so that the verdict is announced on the same day, so Mama—can become free next week."

"That's right. I know that she's innocent, but it was worth it working so hard, Aria."

"Yes...so, with this...from now on, um...a little bit of *that kind of thing*...I know I have a little bit of space to think about s-something like that...'Could I?' or s-so I w-was thinking, and just at that point, y-you...ri...riri...ring..."

She tried once more, whispering, to return to talking about stuff like romance after talking about her mother...Aria had seemed strange to me since earlier...

"Somehow...you're different from normal. Did you eat a peach bun you dropped on the floor?"

Thinking that there might be something wrong with her body, I took the opportunity to change the topic and asked that question.

"Nobles don't do that kind of thing! I'm not you!"

Aria turned towards Daiba—

"That's not it, from now on, Kinji and I...that's...w-what...? Rather, why am I only talking about this stuff? Since before..."

"Don't ask me."

Aria...there really is something strange about her tonight.

Her nerves are probably strained from the shock of being forced to be an elementary school student.

"...Shall we go home? It's become cold."

"Y-Yeah..."

We returned to the classroom, and—Aria took hold of the back of my uniform with her miniature hands.

And before I turned around, she put her forehead against my back.

"Then...let's say that with this, we've advanced a step."

"A step..."

"Yes. It was beyond just one door, and it was only for five minutes, but this...that we had tonight—it was the first date of my life. We advanced past that step. I've decided on that."

...

Well, whatever Aria wants to think is up to her.

"Alright, I'm heading back."

'That's right'—

I'm not going to say that. After all, you're a little strange tonight.

Strange, or rather...

My intuition isn't great, but the Aria on the veranda...somehow, I felt that she was talking from the depths of her heart.

I also thought that she couldn't do it very well.

And it didn't seem like it was just because my ability to understand her was lacking.

Not being able to phrase one's thoughts well. That happens often, but...normally, at that kind of time, people won't talk much. They want to speak, but they can't. They take that kind of attitude.

But, it felt like the Aria just now was talking about her deep thoughts without being aware of it.

It didn't feel like she was lying. But...the cover that Aria used to cover her feelings—the cover that everyone uses to hide their true thoughts...it felt like that had been removed.

People that are drunk or are delirious with fever...speaking as a Butei, they are in a state where it's almost like they've been affected with a minor truth serum. Those kinds of people will accidentally spill out their true thoughts, things that they can't put into words, as incomprehensible expressions.

You can't place any weight on anything that you're told while people are in that state

So—

I'll pretend that what took place on that veranda never happened.

"You must've gotten chilly. I'll make you some hot coffee when we get home."

Exiting to the hallway from the classroom with its lights off, I said those words while we walked side by side, illuminated by emergency lights—

"Yeah."

Next to me, Aria nodded once.

"...When Kanae-san's released, let's celebrate with everyone. We'll have a drink at Club Estella in Daiba. I'll order a massive cake in advance. When we've finished eating it, we'll finish off with roasted espresso lungo doppio, which'll be far more delicious than my instant coffee."

Her face, dimly lit up by the green emergency lights...looked so very happy.

That's great, Aria.

Looking at your smile, I honestly, from the bottom of my heart, think that way.

Your mother will be innocent. Your wish will be granted. That moment will finally come next week.

Really, truly...that's great.

Aria.

3rd Ammo: Silver-white ICBM

"The accused, Kanzaki Kanae—is sentenced to 536 years of imprisonment."

That verdict echoed within the 800th courtroom of the Tokyo high court.

I, seated in the seats of the defense, couldn't believe my ears.

The text which declared the postponement of the death sentence or life sentence wasn't spoken by the judge, so I had had a bad feeling, but...I can't believe it. Aria's mother, Kanzaki Kanae-san...

...was convicted.

And there wasn't even a delay before its execution. It's a heavy sentence. Too heavy.

"..."

Sitting next to me and dressed in a suit, Riko looked over to the prosecutors with sharp eyes.

Jeanne, who we had lost all communication with after Bandere, and Sayonaki Vlad, being held in a level 5 holding facility in Nagano, weren't present, but I had thought that we would definitely win this trial.

—We lost. Completely.

The sentence was reduced from the first trial, but still, this high court trial's a loss for the accused.

Because, Kanae-san's actual life sentence hasn't changed.

(That's not right...! Something like this is...!"

Strange.

This trial is strange.

For some reason, there wasn't an audience, and there wasn't anybody from the mass media either—

I even feel that there's something that we don't understand lurking at the back of this.

"That's an unfair verdict!"

Aria stood up, her chair scraping on the floor, and she shouted in a high-pitched voice.

"This—Why!? I gathered so many testimonies, so much evidence—Why!? Mama is...Mama is innocent! Why!?"

Aria, also dressed in a suit, tried to sprint over to the prosecution, but—

The young female attorney, Renjou Kuroe, held on to her tight, keeping her back.

"Don't raise a racket, Aria! You're giving a bad impression for the next trial! We'll appeal directly, so calm down!"

—The next trial—

If she's sentenced to life imprisonment, we'll no longer be able to overturn it.

This trial has finally been driven into a corner.

"Let go! Let go of me! I'm not angry at you! You're talented, and you did all you could! The one's that're strange are those people!"

Aria wept as she pointed at the prosecutors and further, even the judge.

"Do it over! Do it over again! I'll replace all of you and do it again! This is a—mockery! You've all conspired together to frame Mama...My Mama! This is a conspiracy!"

"Stop it, Aria! There's still the supreme high court! This isn't definite!"

Unable to say anything other than that, I also went to restrain Aria, but—

Even when together with Renjou, who was a former Butei, we couldn't control her.

Looking around, the security had taken out their handcuffs and were coming to surround Aria.

This is bad. This is really bad. If Aria punches them and gets arrested here...!

"—Aria. Please calm down."

With that single quiet sentence, uttered from the seat of the accused —

I knew that Aria had regained control of herself.

Her gaze was turned towards her own mother—

—Kanzaki Kanae-san.

Aria had been struggling violently just a moment ago, but her eyes changed from rage to sadness...she just...she just looked at Kanae-san.

—Please don't go. Please don't be apart from me—

Her eyes seemed to be clinging onto those words.

Wearing a grey suit and shaking her wavy hair, Kanae-san faced Aria...

"Thank you, Aria. Your hard work...really made me happy. I can't believe that you had made I-U your enemy, that you had accomplished this much. You've grown a lot. For a parent, that's a joy beyond all other."

...and she was calm.

More so than anybody else here.

"Tohyama Kinji-san. I thank you too from the bottom of my heart. You've given Aria an amazing partner. I'm happy that I'm able to see that with my own eyes. But—"

Kanae-san spoke up until that point—

Erasing the expression on her face completely, she closed her beautiful eyes with those thick eyelashes.

And her face formed the expression of...someone who had been made a scapegoat and was thinking about the person who had appointed her death...someone who wasn't here.

"—I knew that things would turn out this way."

She muttered.

Apparently trying to comfort Aria, who was clutching the guns with Kanae-san's picture on them and continuing to cry, Renjou bundled us into her own Audi, and after spending some time in the parking lot...

She started forward, as if chasing the vehicle carrying Kanae-san from the high court.

She was thinking along the lines of...'Even if just a little, I'll let Aria be by Kanae-san's side', right?

Aria, on a passenger's seat, was staring at the transport vehicle, which had gone through Roppongi Road, avoiding a traffic jam.

"Mama..."

Flicking a glance to the front mirror in response to that voice, I saw that Aria was...still crying.

That's...that's right.

In this trial, the defense was fought to win.

For the sake of winning, Aria had literally risked her life, continuing to fight. For several years too.

Throwing away her youth as a normal girl, she ran around the world, fighting with Riko and Jeanne, capturing Vlad, driving away Sherlock and Patra and gathering evidence.

—In spite of that.

Only Riko, Jeanne and Vlad's share was deducted from Kanae-san's sentence.

The evidence of the defense concerning the other members' crimes wasn't enough. Their sentences were left behind.

Why? I don't know. The case of the prosecution regarding Kanae-san's crimes seemed...even for an amateur like me, illogical. It was clear that their reasoning didn't stand. Even their evidence was ambiguous.

—However, judgement was passed.

...What do we do now?

Would it be fine if we arrested all the scattered remnants of I-U, including Patra and Hilda? And then would it be fine if we took a rope to their necks and dragged them to court, making them say that they were in the wrong? That's just a dream.

Even if we could, something like that would take years.

Renjou had bought us time, but there's no way we would make it in time for the Supreme High Court.

The delay of a trial in Japan was improved through the enforcement of frequent new laws. No matter how hard we worked, within maybe three years...no, within two years, the supreme high court would judge, and Kanae-san's life sentence will be definite.

...While worrying about that, I looked at Riko, who was sitting next

to me.

Riko had closed her eyes earlier, seeming to be thinking about something.

The car drove on, keeping up with the transport vehicle. It took a right at a reservoir intersection—entering Sotohori Road—and approached Kinnoushita.

At that moment, at a place quite far away from the stop line of the traffic light...

The transport vehicle stopped.

"...?"

Renjou took off her sunglasses and looked up the road.

I had also noticed the irregularity.

The traffic lights in front of us—

(They're off...?)

Neither red, yellow, or green were shining. They were off.

The lights for pedestrians were also off, and people were milling around in front of zebra crossings, looking around at each other.

"...What is it...?"

Looking around, I saw that crowds of salarymen were pouring out of the buildings to the left and right, worry all over their faces.

I noticed late because it was noon, but it's dark inside the cafe's and convenience stores on the ground floor.

The lights on the billboards had also gone out.

"A blackout?"

Just as Renjou muttered those words, Riko opened her eyes wide, as if she was alerted of something.

"...?"

The next instant, my eyes—

—took hold of something...irregular.

Something black was spreading out from below the transport vehicle in front of us, which was currently stopped...and it was coming this way.

It looked like it could have been a fuel leak, but that wasn't it.

That was...a shadow...!

The 'shadow' was stretching this way.

I looked to the sky from the car window, but it didn't seem as if there were any helicopters or airships passing by.

"...!"

In the blink of an eye, the shadow enveloped the bottom of our car.

That too was strange. The space outside the car remained bright.

Though there's nothing above, there's still a shadow...!

—This is...!

The instant the memory of a scene like this flashed into my mind ——

"—!"

A flash of light erupted, and following it was an overwhelming screeching of sparks, piercing my ears.

Renjou's voice of surprise as well as Aria's shriek resonated in the car.

I had thought that it was an explosive, but that wasn't it. This is—electricity. A high voltage electric current had just torn through our car.

It gave rise to an impact which felt like we had been struck by lightning from below.

"...!"

The current seemed to have passed through the metal portions of the car—in other words, the exterior, leaving the interior unharmed.

However, smoke as well as a choking sound was rising from the bonnet...not to mention the flames licking out from under the hood.

Tens of liters of gasoline are held inside a vehicle.

If it ignited, all of us—

"Everyone, get out of the car! We're in danger!"

Kicking the door open and getting outside, smoke was rising from the transport vehicle in front of us as well.

All its tires had gone flat too.

"Kanae-san—!"

Just as Aria and I tried to sprint towards the transport vehicle—

Golden sparks burst from the rear of the vehicle.

"—Mama!"

"Aria, wait! It's a trap!"

Looking inside, the driver was hammering on the door.

It seemed like he was trying to get out from the car, which had come to a stop, but was unable to.

Could the door be broken? Or was something installed there and is keeping it closed?

Having gotten onto the asphalt, I noticed that the strange shadow by my feet had disappeared.

A series of unnatural movements from an unnatural 'shadow'—

"Hilda...!"

The reason I shouted her name—

Was because I could see her.

At some point in time, she had stood up on the car and now, she was twirling her frilly parasol—

Giving off a decadent and, somehow, unlucky impression, a girl in gothic lolita.

Having put herself forth as 'Grenada' during the Bandire, the most battle hungry of them all—

And she was the vampire girl who bit Aria that night!

"...Hilda! I've seen you in photos—but this is our first meeting, isn't it...!"

Hilda sniffed at the sight of Aria, who had drawn her guns reflexively.

And shaking her twin-tails, curls of golden hair hanging downwards, she looked the other way.

"That's intolerable. How rude. I'm not really in the mood to fight, you know? I really hate the sunlight."

Hilda pressed the handle of the parasol against her cheek, as if embracing it—

"I say that, but I accidentally acted! Well, you just casually came out of Tamamo's barrier after all. And also..."

Tapping the roof of the car with a stiletto heel made of black enamel, she indicated inside it.

"This is your Mama, isn't it? I'll exterminate every one of Father's enemies, their families, their followers...I'll force them to

extinction."

"—Kinji, give support from the right side!"

Aria shouted in her anime-like voice—

Following her usual movement pattern, she sprinted straight towards Hilda.

She ran with abandon, a reckless charge which made it seem like she had a jet engine strapped onto her.

"...!"

Without missing a beat, I drew my Beretta and ran towards Hilda's right...I see, it seems like her field of vision on this side is limited because of her parasol.

The instant my and Aria's shadow stepped into the shadow of the transport vehicle...

"—Mm."

It seemed as if Hilda exerted herself slightly—

"Uu—!"

"Kyaaaaaaa!"

Aria and I fell to the ground simultaneously.

T-This is...!

Her ability...!?

It was like I had taken the shock of a 600~900 thousand volt stun gun.

"As I was saying...don't show me yourselves like this...your blood running so high. I won't be able to hold myself back, will I? Ahh. I wonder if I should start feasting. Even Primo like you...it feels like I could."

I tried...I tried to stand, but I couldn't.

I'm staying conscious. That's another similarity with a stun-gun. Her ability—the current is impressive, but it doesn't seem as if she can raise the voltage.

"...Fu-Fuck...!"

In spite of that, pain is flashing through all my nerves, and I can't put any strength into my muscles.

Even so, Aria hadn't let go of her guns, and her knees were quivering...

"Hi...lda...!"

Crawling inside the shadow, she clung to the license plate of the transport vehicle, which was still smoking.

Her teeth clenched tight, she strained, but—she couldn't. Aria couldn't stand either.

"...Ahh, I've had it. Aria, when I look at you...hunger just seems to well up. I remember your delicious flavour...I remember it well..."

Hilda stepped down towards the trunk as if going down a set of stairs—

Not even giving Aria's guns a thought, she crouched down.

"I wonder if I'll have some accompaniment to my drink. The blood of that dying cockroach over there tastes like soured wine left in a thrown away bottle. On the other hand, your blood is like century old wine."

By cockroach...does she mean me?

I may ask that, but if this continues...I'm really the same as a dying cockroach.

Only able to squirm on the ground...unable to do anything.

I can't even put strength into a single finger. I can't even fire.

"—Hilda!"

A yell rang out—

It belonged to Riko, who had exited from the car.

Only able to turn my eyes in her direction, Riko was holding Walthers in her hands, and knives with the tails of her hair.

"Get away...Hilda!"

Even as she was holding two knives and two guns at the ready, Riko was trembling. Trembling so much that even I, looking from quite a ways away, could tell.

She was stifling her terror, trying to bluff. That's what it felt like.

Seeing her behaviour, I recalled the relationship between Riko and Vlad, who I had battled in June.

When she was young—Riko was imprisoned. Imprisoned by the father of the girl standing before us, Hilda. Dracula Vlad.

Seeing as they seemed to recognize each others faces, could it be that Riko and Hilda met during that period?

"Aaah, the fourth. What fierce eyes. How cute."

Hilda hugged herself, performing the gesture deliberately.

"That's why I love you, fourth. If I'm the most high class of purebred dogs, you're a stray afflicted with rabies. But...you know, don't you? That you and I are friends."

—As if Aria and I couldn't be seen, she spoke to Riko.

"Currently, while father is absent, I am the master of the Dracula family. I won't shut you in a cage like father did. My marble room, my canopied bed of silk, my bathtub of pure gold...I'll lend it all to you. I don't mind leaving Koumeikan in Yokohama to you."

Having said that, Hilda descended to the road.

"Don't get any closer! Don't look down on me. Do you think that I'll be tricked by such worthless lies!?"

—She grinned.

At the sight of a screaming Riko, Hilda brought a finger to her mouth and grinned.

"Look at my eyes, Riko. They aren't the eyes of someone who's telling lies, are they?"

"..."

Riko reflexively stared at Hilda's eyes—crimson irises only slightly filled with sparkling gold.

Her breath seemed to leave her, as if she heard the words 'oh fuck' coming from her heart.

"Alright. Put down your guns and knives. For the sake of our friendship. Do it while looking into my eyes...yes, like that. Do it while looking closely...slowly, slooowly..."

"......!"

Looking at her—Riko put her Walthers down, her hands trembling. She did the same for the knives in her hair...

"Yes. It's fine now, fourth. Good girl. Listening to what I have to say, you're a good girl."

Riko's body seemed to be moving contrary to her own will.

Hilda, her stiletto heels clicking, approached Riko until she was right before Riko's eyes.

Riko didn't fire. She just stared at Hilda in a daze.

—She's done. It seems like she's been affected by some sort of hypnosis.

This is getting ugly...none of us can fight anymore.

Isn't whether we live or die...entirely up to Hilda...!?

Hilda removed one of her bat earrings from her ear—

"As proof of our friendship, I'll give you this."

She attached it to Riko's ear.

"...!"

Riko withered, trembling, but even then, her eyes continued to glare at Hilda.

Hilda faced her with a smile.

Using that opening, I spasmed, trying to get a grip on my Beretta, but—

"Gaaah...!"

High voltage current once again tore through my hand.

My body snapped backwards, leaving me facing upwards.

With that, my hand was numb, and it couldn't move. All it did was twitch.

"—If you're the most hideous litterbug to ever walk this earth, I'm the most beautiful Helena Morpho butterfly. Tohyama. You're forbidden from even turning your face this way."

Hilda frowned and averted her crimson eyes away from me.

This is impossible. I can't do anything. Faced with this witch, the me who isn't even in Hysteria Mode is really an existence comparable to that of an insect...!

No, even if I *was* in Hysteria Mode...could I fight her? With this human stun-gun?

Fuck, I don't want to d-die in a place like this...

Will we be finished here...? So soon...!?

—That moment—

"...?"

Hilda tilted her parasol, her gold twin-tails waving about. Her slender, dainty eyebrows creased, and she looked to the skies.

It was hard for me to move even my eyeballs, but in my field of vision, restricted to the sky...

—?

What is that...?

From beyond the skyscrapers, a silver light could be seen, high, high up in the sky.

It wasn't a star. No star exists that can be seen during the day.

"..."

It was coming closer.

That—

I remember seeing that before...!

It was one of the ICBMs that the members of EU had escaped on at the same time Sherlock had escaped on one. Modified and constructed, it was a transport...!

The instant I realised this—

With enough force to shake the ground, the silver-white ICBM pierced the road.

It didn't explode. It stayed unmoving, like a slanted telephone booth. This really is a transport.

As if to prove it—I could see a hatch on the side begin to open, releasing white smoke.

"...?"

Someone showed himself in the hatch—

Aria, still lying on the floor, seemed to have locked gazes with him.

"That was dangerous. You are...Aria, are you not? I knew when I first saw you."

The sunlight at his back, he showed himself, stepping from the silver-white ICBM, on which 'Polaris 05' was written.

A handsome boy wearing what seemed like the uniform of a foreign Butei High, a grey blazer.

He was shining, like a prince who had come galloping on a white horse to save the princess.

His glossy black hair was immaculate, and it gave off a slight shimmer. The boy stepped from the hatch to the floor.

And as if protecting Aria, he faced Hilda, blocking her way.

"Hilda. You have hurt the person whom, more than anyone else in this world, cannot be hurt."

With a tone similar to the one I use while in Hysteria Mode (though a little higher pitched,) he spoke. Using his right hand, he drew a slender saber from a silver scabbard engraved with an emblem.

At the sight of the saber, which sparkled like a gem in the sunlight, Hilda frowned, as if in discomfort.

"I have three pieces of bad news for you. One, this is a Crux Edge I borrowed from the grand cathedral in Canterbury. Its core is Swedish steel, but the pure silver foil on the blade was shaved from a cross over 400 years old. The second..."

Next, the gun the boy drew into his left hand was...a Sig Sauer P226R, nicknamed the SIG.

It's supplied to governments, an elite automatic sidearm that

England's SAS and America's SWAT like to use. It's expensive, but it's a masterpiece with high reliability.

"Holy bullets. In addition, pure silver bullets that have been blessed by a Protestant church...something that you aren't used to."

Bullets of silver. Those insanely expensive bullets, nicknamed 'Silvers'. They're probably also magically coated—(It isn't an area that I'm familiar with, but it seems like famous temples and churches bless them against evil.)

"Third...I am angry. Hilda, I'm angry that you hurt Aria."

His face stormy, the boy spoke.

The sword and gun he was wielding was called 'Gun-Edge' in Assault.

Even for Aru＝Kata, it's relatively difficult, so it's a style that's died out, but if you're able to master its usage, it's useful in battle.

I also use it occasionally; it's able to respond to both close distance and mid distance threats, leaving no openings.

"...How hateful."

Hilda opened a fan which used black ostrich feathers and hid her nose and mouth with it.

"What a distasteful stench. When I think that it's the stink of silver..."

Tch...That seemed to be the sound of her teeth grinding.

It looks like this boy's threats are working.

"I am well aware of the impoliteness of nobles not following the protocol of a proper battle and launching a surprise attack, but...Dracula Hilda. I will bury you here."

The boy faced Hilda with black eyes...eyes containing an earnest depth along with a tinge of blue.

Dropping his hip a little, he stood ready, arms crossed over each other.

"Aria, close your eyes. I don't want to show her blood to a lady."

Having been told that, Aria remained silent, her camellia eyes staring blankly.

Or rather, Gun-Edge boy, have you been ignoring me all along?

That's intentional, isn't it? He hasn't even looked over here.

"..."

...As the boy closed the distance between them, Hilda, who was clearly showing her distaste of the arms the boy was carrying, gestured towards the clear and sunny sky.

"—If you would like to play with a lady, then think of the time and circumstance. Mannerless cur. Wanting to play on a day with such bad weather, at such a late time...did you think that the noble Lady Dracula would accept?"

Hilda refused with some strange complaint, and...her feet in high heels, her shin, her knee...

Like a melting amber statue, she sunk into the car's shadow.

This too was something that I had seen on Empty Island. Starting from her feet, she disappeared, just like a magician.

"Farewell, then. I'll hold myself back for today."

Finally left with just her head and parasol, Hilda spoke to Aria, leaving those words behind her...

And with that, she disappeared.

A thud sounded, and I turned my head, finally able to move, towards it...

Riko had sunk to the asphalt road.

It felt like the threads of stress that had been stretched out had, along with the hypnosis, dissolved.

"Are you alright, Aria?"

The handsome boy spoke as he took Aria's shoulder, helping her to stand up...

A little bit late, I also somehow managed to stand and stumble towards Aria.

"...I can move. Let go of my shoulder."

Aria, being prideful, turned towards the boy though her knees were still slightly trembling.

The boy examined Aria from head to toe, as if checking on her condition. Realizing that she seemed to be fine, he brushed the dust off his shoulders and straightened his collar.

"What about Mama...?"

Because Aria looked towards the car, I looked as well...

Apparently, Kanzaki Kanae-san had finally able to exit from the car. Supported on either side by bodyguards, she was looking this way with eyes that seemed to be filled with relief.

By law, we aren't able to speak with her, but...she seems to be unhurt. Thank God.

However—

I looked between the ICBM that the boy had been riding and the boy himself.

It doesn't seem as if he's an enemy, but who the hell is he?

"Saying this after being saved is a little rude, but...are you a remnant of IU? What did you come here for?"

I pointed towards the ICBM and spoke before the boy finally looked

towards me.

His eyes, black as obsidian, rested on me in a sharp gaze.

I felt...something like hostility in that gaze.

"Before asking others for their identity, give your own name first."

"...I'm Tohyama Kinji."

"I know. I saw a photo of you during my advance investigation."

Don't ask me for my name then.

"—I am L. L Watson."

Hearing that name, Aria started, letting out a voice of surprise, and turned towards the boy.

—Watson...?

That name was...written in the Inquesta textbook.

Yeah, he was the famous partner of Sherlock Holmes, Aria's great-grandfather and the leader of IU. It's the surname of the famous man, a former military doctor, who was Sherlock's lifelong partner.

"Eh...!? Eh, the-then, you're, could you be...?"

Aria's voice shook a little, but differently from before, when she was numb from the electric current...

And whilst she spoke, she looked up at Watson.

Watson, facing Aria with a small smile, nodded once—

"That's right. I am Sir J.H. Watson's great-grandchild."

This time, he turned to me, frowning.

"Tohyama. You asked me what I came here for, but...do I need to give a reason?"

Watson, who looked up at me with his tidy double-edged eyes, seemed displeased for some reason.

"It's fine for you to say something like that, right? I don't know who you are."

Becoming slightly irritated myself, I responded—

Watson looked at Aria, and then at Kanae-san, standing further beyond.

And—

"I came to save my fiancé and mother-in-law. That's all."

He said.

...?

Not understanding him, I looked at Aria, and her eyes were wide and staring at Watson...She looked at me, and the expression of shock still on her face, she averted her eyes, like she was panicked.

"...Fiancé?"

Because of the atmosphere, which I couldn't really fathom, I asked Watson again.

"I'm talking about Aria."

Isn't it obvious?

As if saying those words, Watson spoke without hesitation.

And looking up at me, who was taller than him, he straightened, repeating what he said.

"—Aria is my fiancé."

Afterward, we explained the situation to the policemen that came running, and we saw off Kanae-san, who was once again put back onto the transport vehicle and sent to the detainment facility...and

also, Hilda didn't seem to pursue us, so...

We parted ways with Watson, who seemed to have something to talk about with the lawyer and therefore accompanied her to her home in Toranomon. Riko suddenly said that there was something she had to do, and she headed off to Nogizaka district.

Left without a choice, Aria and I rode the train back home, just the two of us.

During the train ride, Aria...didn't say a thing.

I teased Aria a little bit, as she couldn't reach the handholds, but when I had just spoke one sentence to her, she started acting strangely, turning her face away from me, so she remained taciturn.

This atmosphere...I can't ask any questions.

About Watson.

L Watson.

Aria is his fiancé.

If you look at historical manga...there *are* things like that among the nobility. Ever since the people in question were very young, their parents arbitrarily decided their spouses.

Aria had someone like that too, or so it seems.

Hmm...That's how it is.

...So, yeah. Those are pretty much my thoughts on the matter.

I've heard about this during an Inquesta class; the Holmes and Watson family were initially, (stemming from their first generation) an intimate, single household. Both were granted the title of nobility, so in terms of family status, it's fitting as well.

Isn't that alright? It's really fitting. A handsome boy and a beautiful girl.

...The air seems charged with these thoughts...

Had I been unconsciously releasing this tension into the air?

The moment we descended onto the Butei High station from the monorail, Aria grabbed my sleeve.

"...Why're you so quiet?"

Huh?

I turned towards Aria, whose voice was subtly trembling.

"Because you're quiet? When we got onto the Ginza-line, I tried talking to you once. You ignored it, so—"

"Don't get angry. Listen to what I'm saying calmly."

"Why is it that I have to be angry?"

"Um, that person just now—"

"I don't really care about Watson. He has nothing to do with me."

In the end, I was forced to use the name 'Watson'.

Leaving Aria at the platform, I descended the stairs ahead of her.

Last month, at this landing...Aria had seen Reki and I and came looking for a fight...And now, Aria caught up to me here.

"...You're doing this even though you were e-engaged to Reki?"

She spoke to herself in a small voice.

Aria misunderstanding things is something that happens all the time, it wasn't especially something to get angry about, but—

No matter how much I tried to resist, I found myself growing annoyed. I turned, intending to give her what she had been looking for.

"That thing with Reki was—"

"Today was the first time I met him."

Had she read my thoughts? Aria reined in her words, which came out a little strong.

"Watson is...the fiancé that my grandmother decided on her own. That was something that I had only been told of once—and my grandmother was getting on in years, so there were often times where she would talk to me of reality mixed with her own fantasy. I didn't take her seriously, and to be honest, I had forgotten. About what she had said."

"..."

"It's true. I swear to God. I first met Watson today."

Looking up at me and speaking sincerely, Aria seemed...somewhat desperate.

"To expand a little, I didn't even know if he existed. I had heard a rumour of there being a heir to the Watson family, but...right now, that family is taking care of the organization Liberty Mason's high-level work. As long as Her Majesty the Queen doesn't give express permission, they can't show their real identity. Every one of them lives with a fake name, doing their work undercover—"

Eyes like that of an abandoned dog, Aria spoke. I...

(Why is she getting so desperate?)

I felt myself getting angry for no reason I could think of.

Isn't she making it feel like I've been shouting at her for having a fiancé?

I've understood all along.

I've understood that you will eventually disappear. I've understood that you live in the world of nobility.

"...Kinji..."

Which is why there's nothing that you need to give any excuses for.

As Butei, you and I are just teamed up temporarily. In the end, you and I are different. In ability, in status, and in the world that we live in.

Staying silent, I turned my back on Aria and walked down the stairs.

The sound of footsteps following me—didn't appear.

L. Watson

Watson wrote his own name on the board in flowing cursive script —

Kyaaa!

Just by him doing that, the girls in class screamed in a high pitch voice.

At the enthusiastic praise, the nervous homeroom teacher, Takamagahara Yutori, stepped away from the teaching platform.

Smiling, Takamagahara-sensei said: "Alright then everyone! I'll be introducing a very special guest, a transfer student! Coming from Manchester Butei High, he's a reaaally cool exchange student!"

So...there's no way, or so I thought, but it was true.

(Watson...He transferred here...)

I frowned, and beside me, Aria was trembling in shock...

Once again, she stole a look at me.

What is it with you? You've been like this since yesterday.

Don't take that kind of attitude, where it feels like you're afraid to touch a sore point.

Unlike you, it's not like I have any business with your private

matters.

It's not something that I should intrude in.

"My name is L Watson. I'll be in your care."

Watson spoke with a voice that was a little high for a guy, and he took a seat at one of the tables farthest to the back.

Just as he took his seat, the bell that signaled the end to homeroom rang.

Simultaneously, the girls crowded around Watson's seat, accompanied by cries of 'Waah!' or 'Kyaa!'

They look like paparazzi crowding around a Johnny's-type idol.

"What was your specialty class back at your old school!? Which one will you be in here!?"

"I was in Assault at New York, Inquesta at Manchester, and Medica at Tokyo—I've come to give a final polish to my Butei skillset."

Kyaa!

The girls started getting excited again. It felt like all their eyes had become heart shaped.

"You're like a prince!"

"I'm not part of the royal family. I'm a viscount."

Kyaaa! Kyaaa!

They became even more excited. Looking at the girls, quite a few of their eyes had now become $ marks.

"Your skin is so pretty! It's even more beautiful than a girl's!"

"...Thank you."

He smiled. The girls screamed with their high-pitched voices when they saw Watson smile, showing off his white teeth. In its

aftermath, a few of them seemed to have become lightheaded, and they staggered around...they were supported by the girls from Medica and Ambulace.

Thank God that Riko's taking a break.

She loves these kinds of disturbances, so she has the habit of exacerbating the situation.

(But...Watson's a pretty big deal.)

If I was surrounded by that many girls...Just thinking about it makes me want to run away. I'd prefer being surrounded by armed criminals.

Even so—Watson was perfectly calm.

It feels like he doesn't care at all, confronted with a herd of girls. He's completely used to them. With the relaxed attitude that comes with being surrounded by friends, he's handling them well.

Taking into account the fact that he's such a beautiful guy, he's in a completely different league.

"What club are you joining, Watson-kun!?"

"I don't have any plans."

Hearing that answer, the colour of all the girls' eyes changed in an instant. "Join the soccer club! I'm starting as the manager soon!" 'Eh, how do you feel about the drama club...?" "Please come to the swimming club!" They started fighting over him with invites.

"I'm sorry. I don't join club activities in any of the Butei Highs. Swimming is especially bad for me—"

Watson smiled wryly, but the girls didn't back down so easily.

They really want to become the transfer student's friend, don't they. He just happens to be handsome and a viscount as well.

"You can't just be in the go-home club!"

"That's right. Are you planning on napping on the roof together with Kinji?"

Hey, swimming club people. I'm planning to eventually transfer out, so it's true that I'm not joining any club activities, but...don't mention my name. Or rather, were you watching me napping? Well, when Aria or Shirayuki are in a bad mood, I don't want to head back to my room, so I just sleep away the time.

"But, if Watson-kun hangs around with Tohyama-kun...he'd get tainted...ah, won't I have a chance if that happens...?"

The drama club girl whispered to herself.

Tainted? What's that supposed to mean?

"Tainted?"

Apparently, Watson had felt something strange about the same phrase. He asked the girl about it.

The girl glanced in my direction. Holding her hand up to her mouth in order to prevent her lips being read...she whispered something to Watson.

Having listened to her, Watson looked in my direction, his face reddening—

"...Wha...! Tohyama did tha...? H-How lewd...!"

His thin eyebrows raised in anger, Watson glared this way.

His face is pretty, so it doesn't really carry a lot of weight, but in any case..."Looking like that, Kinji's a womanizer. Kanzaki-san, Hotogi-san...there's many other victims too." That's what's been spreading around, right?

That would be because, my involvement in those scandals is often talked about by the girls.

But...to rebuttal her argument...

- In the beginning, Aria stayed in my house to investigate Hysteria Mode's trigger.
- Shirayuki got a key from Aria, and then she stayed in my house for reasons unknown to me.
- Riko wanted to get close to Aria and I, intentionally approaching me and setting an example for Aria.
- Reki proposed to me because of Wind-sama's orders.

I don't even feel like defending myself one by one like this.

Rather, I can't. There's too much confidential information, not to mention things that aren't clear to me either.

Apparently, Watson had been told more tales of my legendary exploits, as unfounded and without proof though they were.

"...Tohyama truly is a lady killer, huh. To have tempted so many...!"

His face reddening even more, he was getting extremely flustered; it almost look liked he was about to blow his top.

Men who've reached that kind of age shouldn't change their expressions so much just from hearing gossip.

Or rather...normally, when boys hear from someone about my fictional female history, they normally admire me, saying: "What an awesome guy. I want to learn from him." I'm not sure why, but I speak from experience.

(Well, whatever.)

I'll just forget about Watson.

He can think what he likes of me.

Those stories aren't the truth. There's no point in talking about it; they're just rumours founded on misunderstandings.

If Watson is a guy who takes stock in rumour without confirming its truth, I'd be devaluing myself as a man just by going up against him.

Afterward, during the normal classes—

Watson kept pace with us.

No, that isn't quite it. It wasn't just that he was keeping pace with us.

When he was pointed out by the teacher, he answered every question correctly. Of course he'd get all the English questions correct, being a native speaker like Aria, but he answered all questions correctly. Questions about math, biology...even Japanese history, which came after.

Even ignoring the fact that Butei High's standard score is quite low, this was something that sparked the admiration of the entire class.

In any case, Watson had just transferred today from a foreign Butei High school.

"I studied a little in advance."

Every time break came, he would say those words to the girls who would come praising him, a wry smile on his face...However, to be honest, he was more capable than me in all of the classes, where I was just about average.

It isn't completely correct to say that someone is smart because they're good at calculation and memorization, but if he's able to remember so much from just a little studying, I have to admit how intelligent he is.

His appearance is beautiful...in reality, he's a noble...now he's a genius too?

That's why girls won't leave him alone.

Afterward, I was waiting for the bus that would bring me from the normal section of the school to the section for the specializations...it didn't come.

Normally, I'd ride on Aria's bike together with her and walk to Inquesta from Assault, but...

When things are awkward, just like they are now, we don't move around together. It's nice not being around Aria all the time, but not having her bike is unexpectedly making things even more difficult for me.

—Yesterday, Aria didn't come home to my room.

I was a little worried, so I had Fuuma from Lezzad look for her. It turned out that, as a form of stress release, she was playing Daruma dropping (with peach buns) with her junior in the girl's dormitory.

For some reason, Aria was in a really bad mood, so her Amica, Mamiya, was terrified.

Really. Venting her feelings on those younger than her, treating her food as toys...

(...She's a brat, just as ever...)

I sighed softly.

Just as I sighed, a black vehicle pulled up in front of the bus stop.

It wasn't a bus. Its hazard lights were flashing, and...Wait, isn't this a Porsche 911 Carrera Cabriolet? It's a super high-class car; it can't be worth less than 1,000,000,000 yen.

As I stood there shocked, the hood of the car automatically opened, storing itself in the back of the car.

The 911 opened up completely, and I saw the person in the driver's seat.

"So, it really is you, Tohyama."

The boy who took off his sunglasses was...Watson.

"The bus isn't coming. At the last intersection, the Assault students started brawling inside the bus. Ranbyou sprinted there and flew

into a rage. She flipped the bus with her bare hands, so traffic's stopped for a while."

...Those bastards from the Die-Die Squad...

I don't care how many of you are injured, but please stop causing trouble for the general public.

Rather than that, Ranbyou...just being Ranbyou. Flipping buses with her bare hands...

"Get in, Tohyama. You'd probably make it in time if you walked, but—I'll send you to Inquesta. There's some things that I want to speak to you about."

—Saying that, Watson opened the door. I could feel that he was slightly uncertain.

What could it be?

Somehow, I feel uneasy being alone with him.

It's not just that I can't stand him—Intuitively, instinctively, I feel danger.

Nevertheless, the bus isn't coming. I guess I'll hold him to his word and get in.

When I got in the car, the hood closed automatically, and Watson started the car, but...

What could it be? I could smell a faint, cinnamon-like fragrance coming from Watson. Why would he have that kind of scent as a guy? Weird...

"...Nice car."

"There was a Carrera that was modified into a two-seater, so I bought it yesterday. In Japan, it's too much to handle if you don't have a small chassis."

That's amazing. He changes the car he drives based on the country?

If Mutou heard about this, he'd go crazy with envy.

But really, this pitch-black Carrera suits Watson. It looks perfect when a beautiful guy with black hair rides in it.

Our conversation didn't continue after that, and we sat in silence.

As we were waiting at a traffic light, Watson glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes before he started hostilities.

"—Looking like this, you're a womanizer, aren't you."

So, you're really going to talk about that?

"You were told that by the girls, huh."

"I hate boys like you the most. Let alone your helplessness before Hilda, you...you treat g-girls...so loosely."

Watson gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

Since he takes things so seriously, it seems that he's the type of guy who lets the blood rush to his head.

Just the type of person I'm bad with.

"So I told Aria to stop living in your room."

"Thank God for that. It was causing a lot of trouble."

I humphed, turning the other way.

Watson did the same.

"It looks like I just don't really get along with you."

"It's not just that you don't *really* get along with me, you *don't*. I feel the same way."

Afterward, as he stopped in front of Inquesta, Watson had an angry look on his face.

"It's planned for Aria and I to formally marry when we both reach

maturity, but...before that, I'm distancing Aria from you. It seems that she holds you with unusual regard."

"Do whatever you want...Thanks for sending me here."

I opened the door, getting out of the car...

"Remember this. *The partner most suited to Aria is me, not you.*"

Watson spoke those words in the same manner as a declaration of war.

Bssssh—!

Accompanying that sound, my butt hit the sport's halls court.

The day after Watson had sent me to Inquesta, period 4...

It was time for PE, and we were told to play volleyball, but—

"...Ouch..."

I was hit by an attack directly to my face. In other words, I had just taken one to the face.

"Sorry Tohyama. Are you alright?"

Kneeling on one knee further down the court, Watson, dressed in shorts, apologized.

I—didn't answer, and made a rough gesture that meant "don't worry about it" before I stood up again.

Rather than that, that attack just now...

Weren't you looking at me, aiming for my face...?

For a while afterward, we continued to score points and they continued to take points from us...after enough times to make people think it was an accident, it finally happened again.

Watson's attack scored a hit right on the side of my head.

Furthermore, the ball landed outside the court, making it our loss.

Judging from the last one, I knew. The others didn't know, but this indeed was *hostility*.

(That bastard...)

Watson had scored half of their team's points in that game. He's an agile guy.

His body's flexible, and he's skillful even in using little tricks. Including the one he used to smash me in the face.

At a corner of the sports hall, the first year girls whose fourth period appeared to have been cancelled (and had been cheering for Watson ever since the beginning of the game) surrounded him.

Watson brushed his hair up, a refreshing smile on his face as he talked to the girls.

...Like I thought, he's avoiding looking this way on purpose. What a transparent bastard.

Afterward, during the lunch break, as I felt my irritation building at the fact that my nose was still aching and ear still throbbing, I noticed something extremely troubling.

(Damn it...)

I didn't have any money.

I was shockingly devoid of money.

This was due to the fact that recently, all I had been doing was work that I wasn't compensated for...and because despite that, I had been involved in a lot of battles, so I had been buying a lot of equipment.

If all I'm doing is spending and I'm not getting any income, I'll run out of money.

Borrowing that motorboat from Mutou's sister the night of Bandere was a serious hit to my wallet. When I asked her to put it on my tab...she flew into a rage, screamed "I'll run you over!" and came to collect my debt on her motorbike.

(Once again, Shirayuki's taking part in her shrine's rituals, so she isn't here.)

Guess I can't help it. I'll get my hands on a portion of the payment I gave to Hiraga-san when I ordered 'Orochi'. The portion that paid for the left hand glove.

But I can't spend it frivolously.

Even if I get a request from any civilian, I'll only be compensated next month.

I'll have to make do with the cheapest thing, this bread roll.

(Even though I'm hungry from just having had PE, all I have is this...?)

I settled the bill, took some water from the self-service section and went to table. I opened the vinyl bag containing the bread...now I slightly understand how Fuuma, the girl in poverty, must feel.

I set to eating my bread, completely alone...

Ugh. Watson was walking towards me, carrying the tray for his meal.

And when he saw my poor excuse of a meal, he smirked in a hateful manner.

"...What is it."

"Shall we eat together?"

Despite the fact that he said that he didn't get along with me, Watson placed his tray on the table, smiling all the while.

Rather...that's the steak plate isn't it, the most expensive dish in the

cafeteria.

It's a steak of Kobe beef. What's more, *blanched* Kobe beef.

"Um, payment is made directly after purchase..."

Lifting my head to face the direction that voice was coming from, the lady who manned the cash register was standing next to Watson.

Looking at Watson, his eyes below long eyelashes were staring blankly up at the lady as she stood there holding her apron and fidgeting...it seemed that he thought that you were supposed to pay after.

"I see, you pay immediately in Japan. Maybe because it isn't customary to leave a tip here?"

Saying that, Watson opened the wallet he had taken out of his breast pocket.

The lady and I startled simultaneously.

10000 yen notes were stuffed into the Louis Vuitton wallet to the point where it seemed like it was about to burst.

"Just a moment. I'm still not used to the yen's currency conversion. Is this enough?"

"Y-Yes. I'll bring the change immediately!"

Having been handed a 10000 note, the lady left, extremely flustered. Watson looked at her go, a wry smile on his face...and with that, he turned towards me.

And with elegant movements, so beautiful that my eyes stared in fascination, he crossed himself, giving thanks for the meal. Afterward, he cut into the steak, which was so soft it almost seemed that his knife sunk into it.

Click...Click.

"Tohyama."

"What is it."

"Do you want some?"

"..."

I stayed silent.

"I'm not giving you any."

Then don't ask.

Faced with Watson, who was taking his meal with graceful movements like those belonging to an actor...I silently stuffed my face with my bread.

Watson watched me do that with lighthearted eyes that glittered triumphantly.

This bastard. He really doesn't like me.

"As far as I can see, it seems like you're having trouble with money."

"Sorry about that."

"For Butei, money is the lifeline which ties us to ammunition and equipment. If it's interrupted, any Butei would be weakened."

"I know."

What Watson was saying...was the truth. Even the first years at Butei High learn this.

As opposed to the police or the Jieitai, who take care of their equipment using public funds, Butei have to think about their finances, which are always spent on equipment.

"You even had some transactions with the Mutou siblings as well as Hiraga Aya."

"...You looked into it, huh."

Fundamentally, Butei run on money.

Putting aside the 'work that I'm not getting any rewards from' that I've been spontaneously doing recently, when it comes to normal requests, Butei are told by Masters to take on requests in order to counterbalance the completion of a request instead of the payment or distribution of money that normally makes up the compensation, even within the student community.

Furthermore, in this case, it isn't forbidden to 'save' money. Conversely, it isn't against the rules to suspend work when payments are delayed.

In the world of Butei, such a severe and realistic side does exist. Even if one is a student.

"I've found one of your weak points so soon."

Watson's handsome face broke into a smile.

I don't really know what—but something about him is dangerous for me. That's all I know.

But, what is it...? That, I cannot see.

At Butei High, even during the second semester, we have PE at the indoor pool once a month, but—the next day, if Watson sets something up for me again, I intend to counterattack.

But unexpectedly, Watson was just watching the class.

(Could it be that just like Aria, he can't swim?)

Watson warmed up with the rest of boys of year 2 class A before he, dressed in a black long-sleeved shirt and pants, put on a pair of Chanel sunglasses...taking a pipe chair, he placed it next to a table after carefully dusting it off.

He likes things to be neat.

He sat down, knees spread in front of him, and afterward, with a manner that indicated that he had just noticed something...he

folded his legs in panic.

Just as I tilted my head to the side due to his strange movements—

"Aalllright, you brats! Do 20 lengths of the pool! I'll shoot the people that slack off to death!"

In exchange of a starting pistol, Ranbyou, who was next to Watson, fired an M600 'Elephant Killer' before disappearing.

Ranbyou...really, it's impossible to take away her teaching qualifications because of that.

Well, I was thankful at least that that violent teacher had disappeared, so we took the fact that she hadn't said whether we should be doing vertical or horizontal lengths as our argument, and quickly completed 20 horizontal lengths of the pool.

After that, there was time left over, so it was time to relax while the devil was away.

Everyone just swam as they liked, and it became a free time where we just chatted by the poolside.

I...took a film magazine from the bundle of magazines that Mutou, foreseeing Ranbyou's abandonment of class, had taken out of his locker, and headed to borrow one of the pipe chairs sitting next to Watson.

"...?"

Looking at him...Watson's face was red as he stared at the boys fooling around in their swimsuits.

(Has he caught a cold?)

If so, then of course he'd abstain from going into the pool.

When the earnest Shiranui, who had completed 34 horizontal lengths, equivalent to 20 vertical lengths, got out of the pool, Watson went 'Ah!' apparently surprised, and slid his chair back a little bit.

"...Hey Watson. If you aren't feeling alright, you should go to Ambulace."

Watson, having been spoken to by me, turned this way, looking at my chest and shoulders—

His mouth trembled, going 'Wa, wa'...before he turned away.

He didn't say anything, and he was red to the tips of his ears. Doesn't he have quite a serious fever?

"Hey Kinji! All of AKB's in this one! Shiranui, you get over here too! Let's have a vote!"

At the poolside, Mutou had without hesitation spread open a gravure magazine was gesturing at it.

"It won't be much of a vote with just three people, will it?"

Shiranui, who was handsome to the point where he was able to stand up to Watson, was a great guy to hang around with...so it seemed like he was pretty excited.

"You guys...What do you gain by doing stuff like that?"

I thought about refusing because of the sheer pointlessness of it, but I feared that I wouldn't be able to borrow magazines from Mutou if I acted indifferently.

As one might expect, I won't go into Hysteria Mode from swimsuit gravure, so I guess I'll tag along.

"Then between all of us, there're 5 votes. Hey Watson, you choose too."

Mutou opened a can of coke and took a sip before spreading the magazine out on a plastic table...

Watson, who had been purposely not looking in this direction to begin with, looked directly away.

"I refuse. Don't spread that kind of book wide open in a public

place."

That kind of book, he said. These gravure photos?

Even *I'm* fine with them.

"C'mon, don't say that. If there's so many here, there's definitely at least one girl who you'll like. You'll think I'm tricking you, just take a look at all of 'em."

Saying things that sounded like they were meant to draw customers to an indecent shop—Mutou, the upper half of his body naked, forcefully slipped his arm around Watson's shoulders, hugging him towards his body and showing him the photos.

"—Kyaa!"

Watson, whose cheek was pressed against Mutou's chest, let out a short scream.

His sunglasses slid off, and his eyes, having become visible, had even become wet.

It looks like blood has rushed to his head. It seems that as he was watching the pool, he was getting feverish.

"Wha...what is it? That voice was like a girl's. Alright then, it's fine if you don't do it. Rather than that...doesn't it seem like you've gotten feverish? Look, have some coke. It's cold, so it feels good when you're hot."

Mutou let go of Watson and stuck out the cola he had been drinking earlier, as if in some sort of apology.

Watson took the can of cola that was pressed towards him in both hands.

"B-But you—before, you..."

"I only took a sip."

"But, yo-your mouth touched it—"

"What're you saying? We're both guys."

Mutou said. Water from Mutou had gotten on Watson's sportswear earlier, so...

"If you have a fever, it'll be bad if you get wet. You have to wipe it off."

Shiranui grabbed a towel and was on the verge of wiping off the droplets of water from Watson's body, when—

Watson sprang up, as if even the thought of it was horrible.

He rammed into Shiranui, and for some reason, me as well.

"I-I'm going back! I can't take any more!"

Saying that with a voice so high-pitched that it seemed like it had changed, Watson ran in a strange zig-zag pattern (maybe because he was panicking?), getting out of the pool area.

Like always...there's something strange in all of his movements.

After school that day...

I had to save on my spending on food, so I bought some canned field rations at a 50% discount—my wallet had become light enough that it felt like I could fly it like a kite, and with it in hand, I gave Hiraga-san a call.

"Hello hello, what can Aya do for you?"

"Hiraga-san, this is Tohyama. Um, this is about Orochi's left hand..."

"Ah, that isn't finished yet. This week is a little..."

"It's a little hard for me to say this, but...the payment for the bill will be a little late. I'll definitely pay next month, so could you finish it up according to the normal schedule? As always, I'm sorry, but I'd like to put it on my tab."

"Mmm..."

Hiraga-san made a noise that seemed to express that she was thinking, the sound of her flipping through schedules next to the mouth of the telephone came through.

"Since Tohyama-kun is a regular, it would be OK under normal circumstances, but...this time...I'd like to postpone it."

"Postpone it...is making it difficult?"

"That's one reason, but the main reason is, I received an urgent request from Masters. Money was donated to the school, so they want me to fix all kinds of broken fixtures around the school."

"A donation...?"

"It seems that Watson-kun gave a whole lot of money!"

Watson...?

"It seems that the person who asked for Aya was Watson-kun too. So, this month, Ayaya is super busy! That's how it is!"

Hiraga-san said, followed by a tired sigh.

...That bastard Watson. What does he mean to do by keeping Hiraga-san's hands full?

Could it be that...this is also more of him harassing me?

"...Hey, Hiraga-san."

"Yes?"

"I understand that the left hand portion of Orochi will be postponed. However...be careful of Watson."

"Be careful?"

"Something about him is strange. He's..."

I thought about saying that he was harassing me in strange

ways...but I have no proof.

I'll just keep that particular aspect to myself.

"??? What about him is strange?"

"About that...um...just something."

"I don't see anything strange about him. Watson's a nice person. Before, he came to Aya's place and ordered some other equipment. Teehee."

That's...Hiraga-san's version of a delighted laugh.

It's the way of laughing she uses when she makes massive profits because the other side of the transaction doesn't bargain even though she's overcharging them.

"No, he moves strangely. When we were at the pool..."

Having had Hiraga-san taken from me, I spoke unhappily—

"Ahhh, could it be *that*? Tohyama-kun is jealous? How cute—♪"

With a cute voice, like that of a kindergartener, Hiraga-san started to say incomprehensible things.

"J-Jealous?"

"There's a rumour going around that before, Watson-kun was all alone with Aria-san in a cafe. There's also information concerning the fact that Tohyama-kun is living apart from Aria-san."

Living apart?

"Y-You're well informed...I didn't know about that thing with Watson and Aria."

"Aya isn't popular, because she's so tiny. So one of Aya's interests is listening to the love stories of the popular people, so Aya feels like she's taking part of them."

W-What a dark hobby. I, who's nicknamed the Introvert, can't really

say anything though.

"If I put those two pieces of information together...Tohyama-kun had Aria-san taken from him by Watson-kun and is jealous. Wahaa, it's like something from a manga!"

"N-No. I'm just...Watson's just strange, so..."

"Watson is a good person. He gave me a big piece of candy. Tohyama-kun, jealousy between men is disgraceful!"

When I tried to repeat myself and say something against Watson, she hung up on me.

It seems that at some point, Hiraga-san was won over to Watson's side.

I've started to somewhat understand, but...it seems that Watson's laying the foundations necessary to seal my movements in places that I can't see.

What's his aim?

Rather than that...candy? He really knows what each of the girls like. One more thing on the list of things I don't like about him.

—I figured out that Watson also has weaknesses.

His luck in drawing lots.

Transfer students decide their costumes for Ristorante Masque afterward, but the time frame is too short, so they aren't asked to make it themselves.

In exchange, they only have one chance to draw. It seems that there's a rule that states that changes will not be recognized.

Only things that could just be worn without any modifications were inside the box that a first year had brought during recess, but...

Written on the lot that Watson opened up under the gaze of several

classmates was—

"Girl's Uniform (Butei High)"

The worst one possible. Why? Because it's a girl's uniform. He's definitely going to be up for some corporal punishment.

Other than me, who was thinking 'about time, you bastard' in my heart, tension was running high throughout the students of Class A.

"..."

Watson's manner gave off the feeling that he was thinking.

"Deception is a part of strategy...If you don't want to be suspected...you should in turn, show your cards eagerly and willingly."

He said something like a proverb in English.

"...No way. I don't really want to do this, but...well, it seems like I'll be throttled by the teachers if I don't. Since I drew it myself, I'll do it. Should I change now?"

So he said. And because of that, the class broke into an uproar.

The girls were rushing into the toilet, jerseys in hand, saying things like: "You're welcome to use my uniform!" or "Please use mine!" "No, mine!" One section of the boys were preparing digital cameras while saying inexplicable things like: "We finally get to see the third boy-girl of our lives!"

There was no need to change immediately, but nobody said that.

Afterward, Watson, having borrowed a uniform from the girls, disappeared somewhere from the corridor, the uniform in hand.

Everyone was waiting impatiently...when a panel was suddenly taken out from the ceiling, and Watson's voice rang out.

"It's the costume that we've all been waiting for, so I'll be making my entrance a little bit of a surprise."

From the hole in the ceiling, a girl dropped down to land standing on the podium.

His SIG SAUER locked and loaded, Watson winked, his face smug.

'Waoah!' A strange cheer came from the boys.

It seemed to be a voice that instantaneously mixed 'Woah!' with 'Wha...!?'

It's not that I can't understand how they feel. If I actually got along with Watson, I might've even let my voice loose as well.

—Watson was that cute.

Not like Kana, who was so beautiful, too beautiful, to the point where it didn't feel real, but she was the epitome of the boyish girl, the girl who has a sense of closeness. Well, when comparing him to girls, he isn't the type to make mouths drop open like Riko or Aria, who turn heads just by walking into the room.

After this had happened—

Even the group of boys who had been resenting Watson, who had snatched all popularity amongst the girls, started to treat him nicely.

Watson became the class favourite, and the number of his friends continued to increase.

Not only did I not get along with Watson, I also didn't have many friends in the first place, so...

Gradually, I found that there was nowhere for me inside the class.

A few days later, Mutou was invited to a party at Watson's (of course, I wasn't invited.) He got to eat a lot of delicious food at Watson's massive room, located inside the dormitory...or so he was saying so happily, so—when I warned him, saying: 'Be careful of Watson,' he answered: 'Watson's a good guy, you know? I only understood it when he changed back then, but he's easy to like,' getting angry at me instead.

(Even Mutou's been charmed by Watson...)

Because I was bothered by it, I did a little searching and found out that the bulletproofed trike that I borrowed from time to time, Road Fox, had been loaned for an indefinite period by Watson. He has a goddamned car. He's clearly doing this to drag me down.

What a dirty bastard. Trying to undermine me from the outside in like this...

Nighttime came, and I sat alone on my room's sofa—

I don't have any hobbies that I can really call hobbies, so I had completely disassembled my gun, maintaining it to pass the time.

Right now, I'm broke. If my guns malfunction, I won't be able to have them repaired.

(Aria's at the girl's dormitory and Shirayuki's at her shrine...I'm alone, huh...)

Guns are normally made out of around 30~100 parts, but my Beretta and DE are modified, so they have more.

So, when completely disassembled, it's as difficult as putting together plastic models. After checking the state of each part, the part has to be cleaned, and in that way, I could spend the time.

I used a flannel cloth to apply oil to the inner parts of the gun, which I had almost finished maintaining.

And as I did that, what I thought of without meaning to, was Watson.

(I know that he doesn't like me because he declared it while in the car, but...)

For some reason, Watson is trying to set up my fall.

He pinpointed my weakness, targeting my lack of sociability and isolating me.

Simultaneously, he used the attribute of Butei High students' mercantilism, their willingness only to work with money involved, depriving me of Hiraga-san and Mutou's help. However, I'm unable to save money and reclaim their aid.

I was unable to resist his actions.

Because of his strategy, little by little, I'm becoming alone.

Well...ever since the Uraga Bay accident, I've been trying to put distance between myself and Butei High, and because of my level of success in doing so, I was nicknamed the Introvert...I'm used to loneliness.

But, I can't take his method of doing things. That's what irks me.

(I don't like using this way of talking about it, since it's sexist, but...that bastard Watson. He's using the dirty ways that women use despite being a man.)

If he hates me, he should just come for a fight like a man. That's the path of all male high school students of Butei High...No, of all male high school students of Japan.

And when that time comes, I'll take him on his offer.

I understand that he'd want to monopolize Aria, who's an amazing Butei, but ostracizing me like this?

Right now, as we're prepared for the battle with 'Grenada', this isn't a time where we should have divides like this.

"That's a scary face, Ki-kun."

Those words were whispered into my ear, and at that voice, which sounded like a bell had pealed ever so softly, I startled, turning around.

And right next to me was Riko.

"Riko...? You're always appearing like a ghost."

"I tiptoed in~. I was thinking like, when'll I be noticed, though."

Teehee. Laughing, Riko raised her head and plopped herself down on the revolving chair by the computer.

She then rolled over here in her chair, coming to a stop beside me.

In her modified uniform that she always wore, on one of her ears was a single earring that I knew I had seen before.

"Oh, oh, Ki-kun. Are you maintaining your guns all lonely by yourself?"

Riko placed her feet, covered with socks that were decorated with things like cherries, on the floor and spun left, then right, turning little by little.

Because of that movement, her frilly skirt and soft, wavy hair floated through the air...

Floating, floating...

And a sweet scent like that of vanilla drifted towards me.

I was still feeling rather dark, so I returned to checking my guns—

"Ki-kun is all alone."

"Don't say it twice. I don't need your sympathy."

"Don't be hurt~. Riko doesn't mean to do anything like that."

"Don't puff your cheek up like that. You look like a kid."

"Ehehehe~."

Completely uncaring about the aura about me which screamed 'Go away', Riko took two PSPs out of her pocket.

And the 2 PSPs in her hands like two guns, she turned to the kitchen.

Exactly at that moment, the microwave went 'ding'.

"...?"

"Here, Ki-kun. You were so into it that you didn't even hear the sound of the microwave spinning, huh."

She was right.

"...I've lost. It looks like I've been too on edge lately."

"You seem to have finished with your maintenance, so play some games with Riko while we eat! Um, you know, Riko bought an autumn-limited set of chestnut rice. There was this special offer for couples where Riko could get a scratch card, so Riko bought two. Ki-kun, my boyfriend, can have one~."

Saying this, Riko walked to the microwave, the big ribbon attached to her back of her modified uniform fluttering...Muttering 'owowowow', she took two convenience store lunchboxes from the microwave.

"Boyfriend...? Well, I'll take it. I'm tired of eating rations."

"Ki-kun, let's duel in Ace Combat! We can do it while eating! The loser gets a slap on the wrist~!"

Riko brought the lunchboxes to the table in front of the sofa and sat herself down next to me with a thud while pushing a PSP towards me.

Ah. Isn't this my PSP? When did she get it out?

Rather than that...are you planning on eating at the sofa table? While gaming?

(She's carefree as usual...)

When Shirayuki, who's always going, "Your manners are horrible!' is gone, she immediately starts to do whatever she likes.

It had been a long time, but I laughed. I laughed at Riko's disihibition. It may've been a little wry though.

...Therefore...

Lying on the sofa all the while, we ate the chestnut rice, fired missiles at each other, ate warm pickled vegetables that were a little weird, fought a dogfight with a rule limiting us to machine guns only, and slapped each other on the wrist.

I had some experience with this game, where we use modern fighters and have dogfights, but—

Whenever Riko turned, she had a habit of leaning in the same direction, just like a kid.

Furthermore, she was sitting directly to the right of me...

"Gnnnnnngh! Alright, I've gotten behind you! Don't run away, Ki-kun! Kyahaha!"

Ah, hey, don't turn to the left...!

With enough momentum to knock me flat, Riko pressed her leaning body against me.

Her smooth arms stuck closely to me, and her elastic thighs pressed into me through her skirt—Her sweet smelling chestnut brown hair w-was pressing against my face. My neck was being tickled by her ribbon and twintails, and it was really ticklish. It was like the right side of my body was melding into Riko.

"H-Hey! Don't get in my way, I can't see my screen because of your hair!"

"Take this! And that! Crash!"

Riko was just innocently playing the game, so it wasn't really erotic at all. Because of that, I seemed to be alright when it came to Hysteria, but I couldn't fly like I wanted to. I couldn't shake off Riko's plane's pursuit.

Aah...I'm out of respawns...I lost again.

Drove into the ground, my F14 was crashed—

"Alright! This is Riko's twelfth win! Ki-kun's won two and lost twelve~!"

Out of energy, I slumped to my left...

As I was lying there, Riko got all over me like I was a futon or hugging pillow.

"Teeheehee! Ki-kun's weak~!"

Several soft area's on Riko's body clung to mine, so—

"H-Hey. Get off me..."

As one might expect, this is bad. So I thought, trying to push Riko off me.

Riko lifted her uppper body up like she was doing a push up.

"Ah, Ki-kun. There's a piece of rice stuck to you~!"

Looking at my face from point blank range, she really took a grain of rice from my mouth.

And she ate it.

"..."

I was starting to get embarrassed when Riko's expression changed into one that showed: 'I've thought of something good~!' A smile on her face, she took a grain of rice from the lunchbox on the table...

"Aaahhh, there's one stuck to Riko too~~"

Sticking a grain of rice to her cheek, she looked up at me with teary eyes.

...In any case, she's going to say: "Take it and eat it. Use your mouth directly." right?

"Ki-kun, take it and eat it♪ Maybe directly with your mouth?"

Riko took a cute pose and said what I imagined she would've.

I flicked the grain of rice off her cheek with my finger.

"Myaah!"

Riko squeezed her eyes into X shapes and rocked upwards—

I caught the sight of her chest, holding a sense of weight that didn't match her diminutive body, bouncing up.

Because of that movement, my face was, for an instant, obscured by two independent shadows.

L-Like always...She has an outrageous body. That's the only part of her that really experienced a growth spurt.

It's like a figure that takes the cuteness of Aria's miniatureness and the *goodness' of Shirayuki's well-sized proportions. That's what I thought when I see Riko from up close again.*

"Mmm? Geez, where are you looking~? You pervert~~!"

Riko thudded on my face happily, as I stared up at her in a daze.

"H-Hey! The punishment was supposed to be a slap to the wrist, right? Don't hit my face!"

Somehow able to crawl out from under Riko, I complained.

"The rules have changed~! From now on, it doesn't matter how you hit!"

She said something which was just an arbitrary decision of The Riko, so—

Having gotten annoyed, I gave my all and at the end of a furious battle that made up the next game, I brought Riko down.

And when she lost, she said, "I'm changing the rule change from just now again! Now it's back to what it used to be~!" running away. My full annoyance at Riko experienced a limit break and transformed into super annoyance...so I caught her, clutching her to my side and spanking her butt through her frilly skirt. Well, just

slapping.

...When we had finished doing those kinds of stupid things, it had become really late.

Looking at my watch, it was already midnight.

We have school tomorrow, so we have to go to sleep soon.

I took a shower, changed into my pajamas and returned to the

living room...

Still rolling around on the sofa, Riko rested her cheek on her hand and grinned up at me.

"...What is it?"

"Mmm. I'm tired."

"I can't do anything even if you tell me."

"Sooo tiiiirrreeeeed~!"

Riko kicked her feet around.

"Doooon't waaaant toooo sleeeeeep~!"

"What're you telling me to do...?"

With a spoiled voice like she had returned to being a baby, Riko rolled around.

At the sight of her, I sighed deeply.

"I want to talk."

"About?"

"Anything's fine~. I want to talk. Forever."

"I refuse. I'm going to sleep."

I opened the door to my bedroom...

The bedroom was cold, so I thought of having some of warm air in the living room flow in and left it open.

"But well...thanks for today."

Sitting on my bed, the bottom right one of the two bunk beds in the room, I said to Riko that which I had been too embarrassed to say earlier.

"You came because I've been depressed lately, right? I feel a little bit better now."

Riko stayed silent for a moment.

"...That's not all."

She responded with a small voice...Feet hitting the floor, she exited the living room, apparently having entered the bathroom.

I could hear the sound of the shower running.

It seems that she wants to sleep here.

I don't want her to, but...Riko came here because she was worried about me, so well, I guess I'll let her do as she wants.

Rather, at some point in the time, the two bunk beds have been occupied as the following: Upper left = Aria, Bottom left = Riko, Upper right = Shirayuki, Bottom right = Me. Therefore, it's split between the four people that can come in and out of this place freely (3 of them are entering illegally.) Riko sleeps here whenever she wants, and it happens quite a lot. As for chasing her out, I can't refuse her right now.

Thinking this, I turned on my side, falling asleep...

I heard the sound of the electricity going off in the living room—and the room darkened.

...Footsteps sounding, Riko entered the bedroom and turned on the footlight...

I heard the sound of her hand reaching my bed, so—

"!?"

I suddenly awoke.

Looking back, Riko, in pajamas, was trying to sneak into the bottom right bed...in other words, my bed.

"H-Hey! What is it? You're the bottom left one, right?"

"Ah, I mixed it up♪ And now, the mix-up will continue!"

Sticking her tongue out, she thumped her own head...

Just like that, she got her knees on my bed.

H-Hey.

What on Earth is this.

Even if I try to run, I can only enter and exit on the side that Riko's on.

Gone into panic, I squeezed my body against the wall, trying to run away, but—conversely, that didn't go well.

Rather, I had now given Riko enough space to get on the bed.

And of course...Riko got on.

What am I doing? That was a pretty good self-destruct.

Wasn't that a movement which is just like saying: 'Get in'?

"I-It's tight, so don't get in."

..."Nobody's here today."

Riko spoke, her voice coming out husky and erotic...

She wasn't wearing the loose smile she usually did, but her eyes were so very sad.

—I-I'm suddenly caught in a massive disaster. I've been cornered in an instant.

To get out of this bed, I have to get out from Riko's side. However, even if I try to get out with all I've got, I might be kept in with all she has...I'll be pushed down by the monstrous strength of her hair, which can move like a snake.

What should I do? My head's completely blank. Terrifyingly, I couldn't even lift my body.

But if we continue to stay silent like this, I don't know what'll happen to me. Just like Riko said, my wingmen that impede Riko from approaching me (Aria and Shirayuki) are gone.

I can't just stay silent. She'll have her way with me. S-Say something, me!

This is really bad, if I really don't say something, then—

I panicked.

"R-Riko. Your pajama's inside out."

And so, I said something that I noticed then and there.

No. Nonono. Kinji. That's not it. That's not what I should be berating her about!

"Ah, you're right."

Her large, double-folded eyes stared down at her own pajamas. Riko put her hands on the hem of her dress, and suddenly—

She flipped it up!

"—!"

I just barely managed to roll over and turn my back to Riko.

What I had been able to see for just an instant was Riko's bare boobs—about the bottom fourth of them.

(D-Do girls...not wear underwear when they sleep!?)

C-C-Ca-Ca...Not that, calm down, Kinji!

This isn't the time to become terrified at having discovered this habit that girls have!

Apparently, Riko had fixed her pajamas. I have to drive her away somehow.

"Riko, you...um, get off. Normally, at this point...you'd be beaten up by Aria or Shirayuki, right? I'd most likely be beaten up as well, for some reason."

Riko spoke to my back, a little bit of a laugh mixed into her words.

"Riko is fine. It doesn't matter who Ki-kun likes. All the girls that like Ki-kun don't really feel like posers, so I'm a little annoyed, but...liking *that*, that means that Riko has a good eye for guys, right?"

"Wh-What're you talking about?"

"Riko is fine with it. When together with Riko...just like today, Ki-kun's always been gentle with me. Mmm...because of that, just like Yuki-chan said, Riko's probably suited to being someone's mistress."

Once again, I could hear the sound of bed's springs squeaking behind my back. S-She turned on her side.

Rather, what kind of conversations do you have with Shirayuki?

"H-Hey. Don't spread the blanket out."

"Eh? Isn't this fine? It's cold."

Saying that, Riko took the back of the blanket that was draped onto my body and crawled inside it.

"My hands have become cold."

Her nose touched the back of my head...around my neck. Riko continued to whisper in a flirtatious voice—

And she stuck her hands in the pockets stitched to the left and right of the stomach area of my pajamas.

"...!"

My body stiffened and Riko giggled.

I've been driven into a corner. I've finally been embraced.

"Riko, you know about—my condition, right?"

As my final card to play, I somehow managed to act calm, warning her.

"You're talking about HSS? Ki-kun calls it Hysteria Mode, right?"

"That's right. Different from Kana, once I go into it, I can't control myself. Originally, it's something that we possess in order to protect women, to act cool, and — I'm only saying this considering the circumstances — to leave children behind."

"*I know*."

Bringing her face close to my head, Riko whispered, the scent of shampoo accompanying her words.

"Then—go back to your own bed."

Really...in a situation like this, when I'm trying desperately to control my transformation into Hysteria, I can't even soften my tone.

However, Riko didn't draw back.

It's fine if I warn her of the worst that may come, right? Even if it's a little harsh?

"What will you do if I go into Hysteria Mode...and attack you?"

I told her as if it was a last warning.

"When it happens, it will happen."

Riko responded, completely calm.

What a...You should think of yourself more preciously.

Furthermore, I'm also involved in this. I'm begging you, so please

accept my warning and back off.

"But if you go into Hysteria Mode, it'll be a little bit troubling~. It feels like Riko's thoughts will all be seen through...every last one of them~. So—flirt with Riko until you're just about to, alright?"

"That's why I'm saying that I don't have that kind of control..."

"It's fiiiine~. I won't do anything weird."

"You're already doing it!"

I put my hands in my pockets, trying to take Riko's out.

And at that moment.

Riko grabbed my hands.

And just like that, suddenly—

(...?)

Riko gripped my hands tightly.

"Please...stay by my side..."

A serious voice.

I opened my eyes, which had been closed so tightly before.

Riko is...

(Riko is...crying?)

I tried to turn back in reflex, but Riko pushed her face against my back, not allowing me to do so.

"...Make Riko forget. Make Riko forget everything...Riko wants to forget...Everything from before...after seeing her, I remember it every night...Nightmares...Riko can't take it anymore..."

"...Before...?"

'H-Hil...Even saying her name is horrible. At Romania...she...I..."

Riko continued to cry into my back.

For a while, as I lay there, listening to her sobs...

I began to be able to read Riko's behaviour.

—Hilda.

The day before, she attacked us with a high voltage current...Riko was the only one she didn't attack. The batgirl of Grenada.

She's the daughter of the person who confined Riko in Romania before.

Dracula Vlad.

That girl probably also...tormented Riko, right?

And probably with the most extreme methods, having inherited her father's sadism.

That trauma was probably relived when Riko saw Hilda.

"Riko..."

...Having nightmares of painful memories...I can understand her feelings of wanting to...rely on someone.

Before, when I had lost my family...I was in that stage of grief where all I wanted to do was cry against someone.

So...having gone through the same thing together and being able to sympathise...well, it's not that I can do that.

Doing something like this is fine...right?

In response to Riko's crying, the Hysteria bloodflow died down.

And turning around forcefully...

"..."

I took Riko's head, which she kept down, not wanting to show her tearful face.

And I hugged her to my chest.

Having done that....

As if the emotions that she had been holding back up till that point had broken through...

Riko cried, her voice muffled by my chest.

Normally, Riko is...lighthearted, and she puts on a strong front, but...from way before, she's had an emotionally unstable part of her.

That's probably the manifestation of the wound she's received to her heart.

(Hilda...)

There's plenty of personal scores that I have to settle with you, but I really can't forgive you. After knowing this.

The next time I meet you—I'll do something to break you. Just like I did to your father.

"...When are you going to sleep until? You're going to be late."

An anime voice, filled with astonishment.

In the midst of the daylight, I lazily woke.

"...Riko...?"

Noticing that there was nobody in my arms, I muttered with a drowsy voice.

"Like I thought, you were with Riko. No wonder your sleeping face was so happy."

I woke up at the sound of *Aria*'s voice.

Aria, dressed in her sailor uniform and carrying her schoolbag, was staring down at me, her hands at her hips.

Just in case...it's impolite, but I flashed a glance at her chest...just confirming that it wasn't Riko in disguise.

It was as small as they could go. It's the real Aria.

Her eyes, which were already angry, grew angrier, and she slid her slender feet further apart, about 15% wider than the width of her shoulders, standing like a king.

This is...a sign that she's angry.

If I tell her that I was with Riko, I'll probably be subjected to hole dancing.

"That's not it. I was alone..."

"Please say that after wiping the lipstick away from your cheek."

What? R-Riko...

I rubbed my cheek, but—nothing was there.

"That was a lie. You're really not suited to Inquesta."

Damn it. She got me.

Bloody Aria.

You managed to pull that on me despite being weak against Inquesta's tricks yourself. Why're you getting so desperate for?

"I passed by Riko below. And in the living room, there's two empty trays of the same meal, both eaten."

As if showing me more evidence, Aria picked up a strand of long, wavy, chestnut brown hair from next to my pillow before discarding it.

"Kinji. Why did you try to hide this from me?"

The blood vessels on her temple standing out to form a 'D', Aria looked down on me.

(G-God, that's terrifying...!)

I'm completely at a loss here.

"T-That's because you were asking with a face like a demon. Rather than that, is it fine for *you* to be here? You were told by Watson not to go to my room, right?"

For the first time in a long while, I activated the super secret technique handed down through the Tohyama family: 'Reverse Blame'.

"I-I...don't need to follow Watson's instructions."

"You certainly followed them very well, seeing as you haven't come here recently."

"That's—because after Watson came, you suddenly became seriously unhappy..."

"Yeah, yeah. Everything's all my fault."

Taking advantage of the fact that Aria had faltered a bit, I left my bed.

Preparing to be fired on, I changed into my bulletproof uniform.

"Rather than that...Kinji, why're you talking about Watson? It's still too early for me to talk about—he arbitrarily said that he'd even become my partner. That's why I'm saying, there's no need for you to stop caring and go running to Riko..."

Her voice getting more and more soft and fragmented, Aria seemed to be making some kind of excuse.

"What are you talking about? Watson's a nice guy. Isn't it fine for you to get along well with him?"

"Are you listening? Why are you getting so angry? It's true that

Watson's a nice person, but..."

"It's fine. I'm not angry. Don't care about me."

As I spoke those words, letting them pierce the air—

Inside me, I felt the hazy thoughts that I had about Aria and Watson settle into place.

Until now...As Aria's partner, I've been fighting against the criminals affiliated with I-U.

But those battles were all very, very close.

If I had taken even one step incorrectly, Aria and I would have died a long, long time ago. Our days were spent walking on a tightrope.

And now, this time we're enfolded into the struggle between 'Deen' and 'Grenada'.

However, I don't have much anti-ability battle experience. If I directly confront those monsters, I'd be completely helpless. Just like what had happened at Sotohori Way.

On the other hand, Watson beat Hilda off with just a threat. He prepared expensive equipment to fight against a formidable foe, and he has the technical knowledge.

In regards to the battles from now onward—

Aria should team up with Watson.

That's why, for the sake of Aria's safety...I probably started to treat Aria badly on purpose, even if I wasn't conscious of it, trying to distance myself from Aria.

Also, in the first place—the two of them are 'Holmes and Watson'.

They fit each other well. No matter what anybody thinks, they'd come to the same conclusion.

"..."

As if obeying what I had told her, 'don't care about me', Aria left the room, her footsteps sluggish.

—I'll be going to school alone again.

And though I'm going to class, I'll be alone.

That would be the fault of my conflict with Watson.

I've been completely undermined, from the outside in.

But, if he's undermined me...

That means that the bastard's moving.

In the battles of times long past, once the fortress has been undermined...

The next step is to attack the heart of the citadel.

4th Ammo: 350m Altitude Tornado

After the Inquesta lesson, I started on the way home only after attending 'Strategy 1' in the Assault lecture hall.

It had become quite late, so when I exited the building, it was already dark. Maybe it's because we're getting deeper into Autumn.

Stepping on the fallen leaves from the trees by the road, I headed towards the bus stop...

Several laughing girls exited from the backdoor of the Connect building, which was next to Assault.

Each of them threw the brooms they were holding behind the Connect section, past a metal fence into the artificial forest beyond. What are they doing?

"Nacchi, we'll be leaving the rest to you!"

After shouting into the forest with their hands cupped around their mouths, the girls went towards the shopping district.

Nacchi...? Somebody's nickname?

"...Ah, y-yes..."

I could only hear the sound of leaves, so I frowned and looked in the direction of the voice...

It looked like someone was cleaning up the fallen leaves in the dim forest.

That was...

"Nakasorachi...?"

I called out to her.

The figure startled, clutching the broom to herself.

Because of that movement, the garbage in which the fallen leaves were kept got caught on the broom...and it fell on its side, spilling its contents.

"U-U-Um, that voice—To-Bo-Tohyama, Boy, Boyama-kun!"

This disappointing way of talking...it really is Nakasorachi.

She was plain, having completely blended into the forest, so I didn't notice.

"Are you cleaning up by yourself? Weren't the people here just now up for cleaning duty?"

It seemed that she had knocked over the bag because of me, so I entered the forest in order to fix it...

"Y-Yes, but, um, I was asked to do it by the other people on duty, so..."

Nakasorachi backed away from me, her legs twisted towards each other...

Her back touched a tree, and she went 'Eek!', scaring herself.

Leaving that aside...rather than being asked to do it, she was forced to do it, huh.

(Really, those people...)

The actual forest is pretty small, but the amount of fallen leaves have reached their peak, so cleaning them up is a pain.

Forcing her to clean this up...that has to be bullying.

In any case, even if I go home, there won't be anybody there, so I didn't have anything to do.

"Lend me one of these."

I picked up a broom and decided to help her gather up the leaves.

Nakasorachi saw me.

"Ah, ah! It's fine, really, it's fine...Hic, hic, hi~!"

It seems like she started to hiccup.

"It's fine, I'll help. Remember the first article of the Butei Charter?"

"Yesh...Hic, th-thank yhou! Thank hyou!"

Still clutching the broom, Nakasorachi bowed her head deeply, her long black hair swinging about.

Your voice is way too loud. Why're you suddenly upping the atmosphere.

In front of me, who was shying away, Nakasorachi leapt to the garbage bag and dropped into a crouch. She then started to stuff the spilled leaves into the bag.

Well, she can really do it if she tries. Her dull movements from just a moment ago suddenly became sharp.

I started sweeping up the leaves...

"......Nnn....!"

I averted my eyes from the full, plump thighs that were visible from the corner of Nakasorachi's skirt, as she squatted there vulnerably.

L-Luckily it's dark around here. If it was bright, I would've seen *farther in*.

Rather—if you're going to squat, squat with your knees together.

"...? What's wrong with your eyes?"

I, whose gaze had fled upwards, noticed that there were no glasses beneath the veil of Nakasorachi's long front hair.

"Ah, ah, my glasses. That's um, during class, I was clumsy, and a ball, um, during PE, a volleyball, I was hit, my glasses, um, I was clumsy, um..."

Just because I spoke to her, Nakasorachi started to talk in a way where she was rearranging the sentence order.

Apparently, I've a companion in the 'ball to the face' team.

"Rather, you're being...pretty polite? We're in the same year, so it's fine to speak casually."

"G-guys, b-boys. I-I've, um...never really...talked...to boys before, so...just by reflex, I started, um, speaking politely. S-Sorry!"

Nakasorachi dipped her head with such momentum that it looked like she was going to thrust her head into the bag containing the leaves.

"A-Also, I-I, g-got carried away, a-and I-I've only seen, To-Tohyama-kun, during battle, through a camera image, so i-it's like, I'm able to meet a person, f-from a film, a drama...I'm suddenly, talking too much, w-when I'm spoken to, I-I get carried aw-aw-aw-awawa..."

"Ahh...it's fine to speak politely. Alright, let's gather up the leaves that've fallen down."

Starting Nakasorachi, who had stopped working, back up...We divided the work, with me gathering the fallen leaves with a broom, and Nakasorachi crouching down, picking them up in a dustpan and putting them in the bag.

If I gave instructions, Nakasorachi would follow them properly, so the cleaning went on smoothly—

"...This should be it, right? It's so dark I can't really tell."

"Yes. T-The sound of the grass and leaves ru-ruru-rustl...ing has gone."

Nakasorachi closed the mouth of the garbage bag, when...

The sound of a car honking its horn at students who had exited Connect and were trying to cross the road rang out.

"Eek!"

Nakasorachi frightened at just that noise and leaped into the air, clutching onto my arm.

(Uu...!)

Th-That was dangerous. I obstructed her with the broom so it ended in an instant, but boobs that held a *loose* softness and were the size of volleyballs had pressed into me.

For me, this held the same danger level as being pierced by a sharp blade.

Nakasorachi's eyes seemed to have met mine, which were filled with tension.

"Ah, ah, ee-eek!"

She rammed into me with unexpected strength.

Thanks to that, the back of my head smashed into a tree trunk. Ouch...

"I-I-I-It's not what you think! T-The reason I grabbed your hand wa-was completely unrelated from the fact that our eyes met! I-I wasn't f-f-fantasizing about T-Tohyama-kun!"

...What is it this time...

"I-I wasn't d-doing anything like f-fantasizing here! Nothing dirty! Nothing a-about the depths of the forest! I-In the shadows of the underbrush, where nobody's eyes could reach! I-I wasn't!"

In the depths of the forest...? I have no idea what she's saying.

"Ah, Nakasorachi. Please don't say anything right now."

I said—

"!"

Nakasorachi stretched out her body like she had been subjected to a high voltage electric current.

"T-T-T-T-That kind of forceful...! B-Butbut, we've finished cleaning, so I-I'll just lay something over the u-underbrush in advance! Please wait for a moment!"

As if pushing a reset button, I lightly tapped her on the waist with my broom.

"Hey. I'm finishing up. Speaking is forbidden until we finish. Alright?"

I picked up the bag filled with fallen leaves, and Nakasorachi nodded again and again, one hand over her mouth. She tottered off to gather up the brooms. It looks like she's obeying what I told her, 'don't talk'.

Rather...Nakasorachi's cowardly enough that she gets frightened from a car horn, yet she serves as a Butei.

She's probably a rare type of person. At our school, at least.

At the bus stop, I was waiting with Nakasorachi for the bus.

"To-Tohyama-kun. Th-Thaou yonk, for, um, today."

Thank you, maybe?

"It's fine. All I did was help you a little for today."

"T-This is the first time, so-somebody's, helped me li-like this, so...I-I don't have...friends, so, all I have is, J-Jeanne-san..."

...Jeanne.

Now that she mentions her, what could she be doing?

Ever since the Bandere, I've not seen hide nor hair of her—it's worrying.

"...Don't you know where Jeanne is right now?"

I asked, though I expected her to say no.

"Right now? I-In my room, or rather, th-the room Jeanne-san and I are...sharing, i-in the, gi-girl's dormitory...I think?"

"Eh?"

"At one point last week, she called me to ask for something...She said that she was coming back that morning, that she'd been absent, from school. Because she was injured. Right now, she's in the room."

Jeanne.

She'd returned to Butei High?

However, she said she was injured. That's worrying. I'll have to go meet her.

However...Jeanne seems to be roommates with Nakasorachi.

I don't know which room it is, so I'd like her to guide me there, but that, in short, is like telling this person, 'let's go into your room' so it looks like I'll have trouble bringing it up.

If I don't say it a little carefully, I'll be made to do another sentence order quiz.

"Nakasorachi, I've like to ask you for a favor..."

"F-Favor, favor? Th-that's i-impossible, a fa-favor from a b-bo-bo-boy..."

Suddenly this.

"I-I'm the t-type of person th-that can't s-say no when as-asked a favor of! So, pl-please be gentle!"

"That's convenient. I'd like—"

"B-Before that, I-I have t-to change! B-boy, please let me change! Especially the bottom!"

"I haven't said anything yet..."

That was what the situation was like, so I needed the time from when we got on the bus till we got off the bus to communicate to her what I meant (and I only just managed to do it too), but...

Somehow, I was able to go to Jeanne and Nakasorachi's room, located in the third girl's dormitory.

Together with Nakasorachi, her knees shivering as her legs pressed together in an X shape, I ascended to her room.

"Wow..."

Inside the room, massive amounts of acoustic equipment were gathered, enough for me to let out my voice.

Countless speakers and expensive looking amplifiers were piled up on a rack, surrounding a black desk with a semicircle.

The soundproof walls were painted black, and headphones of every color were hanging from them like an electronics volume retailer.

Not only did the entire scene look like the mixing room of a radio station, but in the room, there were even communication devices coming from every time period and every place imaginable, all lined up neatly. Not only computers and wireless devices used for processing, but there were around 50 types of handheld cellphones.

The places the access lamps lead to blinked with lights, and in the midst of this room, which smelled of electronic devices...the only thing that resembled a girl's room was a miniature decorative plant, placed right by the window.

Rather, that plant with two leaves...there's what looks like a small placard with 'Tohyama-kun' written on it standing there. Was there a plant like that?

I was looking at the mini plant when Nakasorachi leaped into the air with a '!' and covered it with an empty box for headphones, hiding it.

"I-I-It's not what you think! I-I do-don't talk to that plant at all! I-I'm not *that* l-lonely! Ah, also, there's nothing inside that small room over there! Things that I bought in preparation for unexpected circumstances, l-lewd underwear, alcohol, none of that is there!"

"Um...I haven't come to raid your place. Rather than that, Jeanne is...?"

"Jeanne-san is, that way."

Nakasorachi turned her back on 'Tohyama-kun' and pointed at a door. That was the only door with a wood grain, having been decorated in an antique, western style. Needless to say, it was just like Jeanne.

The door creaked as it opened, and when I stepped through it, it was bright.

It does seem like she's here. I can't see her though...

A mahogany desk. A light which looks like an ancient gas lamp. Somehow, it seems like the room is decorated with chic ornaments, just like an executive office of a high-tier business, or a politician's office. It's completely different from the Nakasorachi zone.

As for the wooden bookcase...French and Japanese books that seemed like history books lined the shelves.

(She's a scholar, huh...)

I thought, taking out a book, and beyond the books bound with leather, there lay another row in...Mm...?

There were comics for girls hidden inside. And a lot of them.

Shoucomi, Margaret, Betsufure, Hanatoyume. Hehe. Jeanne reads stuff like this?

I've found an unexpected side of her. So she keeps the girly part of her hidden *inside*. That's just like her.

Rustle...Rustle.

Raising my head at the slight indication, there was another room further in. It seemed that Jeanne was inside there.

That's right, this isn't the time to laugh.

Jeanne. She chased 'Grenada', and it seems that she was injured, but —is she alright?

(If she's heavily injured and is sleeping, I can't be noisy.)

So I thought, opening the door silently...inside was a small room, long but thin, and it seemed like it was being used as a walk-in closet.

But—what on Earth is this?

Inside the room...frills, lace...red, white, pink, aquamarine...checkers, stripes, heart patterns...dresses like this were in rows, leading all the way inside.

This...I was forcibly made to remember it by Riko, but...this is lolita fashion. And this closet was like a clothing store, and it had enough stocked here to resemble a wholesaler.

(Did she get them from Riko...?)

I thought, but the sizes of the clothes here were bigger than Riko's. These clothes are meant for someone far more slender.

Just by walking, I parted the masses of lace and ribbons that brushed past my face and limbs, advancing through the lolita

jungle...

And she was there.

In the innermost portion of the long, thin room, Jeanne stood before a full length mirror, bordered with Rococo style engravings.

She was wearing the brand name waitress uniform that I had drawn the lot for as her proxy for Ristorante Masue. The uniform of 'At Home Cafeteria'. Standing there like a model, she looked at the mirror, an ecstatic smile on her face.

Wearing a skirt with openings that drew attention to her tensed long, beautiful legs, she placed a hand on her hips...

"Hehe. It really is nice."

... ...

She placed a hand on her knee and leaned forward. Turning back subtly, she adjusted the big ribbon on her back before brushing a hand through her long, silver hair (which she had let down), letting it flutter through the air.

What...is she doing?

"Heh...That I would look so lovable...Hehe."

...I...

Couldn't call out to her at all.

She was doing a solo fashion show.

Like a puma watching its prey, I peered out at my target from between the leaves of lace...

Apparently satisfied, Jeanne adjusted her headband.

"Hehe. To think that a day would come when I would be able to wear this boldly in front of everyone. The people at Informa will not have even thought that I owned something like this. Tohyama

drew the best lot possible. He did well."

She spoke to herself.

And so, my voice leaked out.

"Ahh..."

Having heard my voice, the Witch of Silver Ice, Jeanne, froze.

Her eyes meeting mine in the mirror, she stopped moving, as if her heart had stopped in that position.

"Jeanne. First of all...You're doing pretty well, aren't you? Nakasorachi said that you were injured, so I was worried. Also, one more thing. What the hell is this? Are these all yours?"

Walking into the solo fashion show from the forest of frills, I spoke...

Finally moving, Jeanne covered her face with her pale, white fingers.

"...This...This is the end..."

Her skirt swaying, her body crumpled as her knees dropped to the floor, just like the heroine of a tragedy.

"...What's the end?"

"...Tohyama. You...You have seen that which cannot be seen. I cannot let you return alive."

Tears in her eyes, Jeanne drew Durandal from her back.

"H-Hey! You're armed even though you're wearing that...!?"

Overreacting, almost like I had seen her naked, Jeanne held the scabbard in her hands. Panicking, I grabbed onto it.

As if her hands were devoid of strength, Jeanne let her sword go immediately.

"There...There is no-one who has seen this room. This is the secret garden that belongs to me and me only. I had been keeping this a secret from even Riko...!"

Jeanne's eyes were brimming with tears, her hands trembling...

And this time, a Cx100 greeted me from behind Jeanne's cocktail apron.

"I-I got it. I'll keep it a secret. Between just the two of us. So please don't shoot."

"...Do you promise? If you talk about this to anyone, I'll make you into a frozen gratin."

"I promise. Or rather, humans can't become gratins."

I said.

Jeanne sighed, a sigh that spoke of melancholy itself.

"...If I fired in a place like this, I would be making holes in all my clothes..."

And she stowed her gun away.

Holes in clothes are worth more than my life? Well...I was saved by that, so you have my thanks, western clothing.

I sat on a leather sofa in the room that was more like an executive office, waiting for Jeanne.

Jeanne had changed into her uniform and her cheeks flushed with pink, she brewed me some coffee, lips twisted into a pout.

"I will say this now, but I myself know very well."

Sitting down with her knees together, just like a lady, Jeanne spoke,

her legs slanting forward.

"Know what?"

"That those kinds of clothes do not suit a girl like me."

Really seeming as if she was embarrassed from the depths of her heart, Jeanne kept her head down but looked up at me.

"Those dresses are lovely when girls like Riko, small in stature, wear them. It is decidedly so. However...I am rather tall and have been raised as a boy since I was very young. Therefore, by nature, it does not fit me. However, the more I thought of it...for some reason, I started to feel a sort of yearning for those dresses..."

Ahh...

Well, it's not like I can't understand.

It's human nature to yearn strongly for that which we don't have.

"And then, there was Riko's influence on me...though I knew that it did not suit me, I went to Harajuku, thinking to buy one dress...and after that, it became a habit of mine, and now, things are as you have just witnessed. Haha...I am a laughable girl, am I not? You can laugh if you want. Hahaha..."

A broken laugh spilled from her lips...

"N-No, I'm not going to laugh. I thought it was cute."

The clothes were, that is.

"...C-Cute...?"

Were my words unexpected? Jeanne's ice blue eyes widened.

"Mm? Y-Yeah."

The clothes were cute.

"What a strange person. You cannot have much sense about these things."

Jeanne said, looking to the side...Facing the wall, her face looked like she was resisting the urge to smile from happiness.

Th-Thank God.

It seems like I made the right dialogue selection in the visual novel called life.

It looks like I can finally get to the point.

"By the way...Where did you go after Bandere?"

"—I was keeping track of Grenada's movements the entire time."

"What are they doing? I can't see any of their actions from here."

"Everyone has returned to their respective territories and they are all looking for an opportune moment. The only person that acted immediately is Hilda herself. I also engaged with her. The truth is, I was heavily shocked."

"Was that your injury? Where is it?"

"You would not be able to infer this from my appearance, but the damage has remained in the tendons all over my body, and I cannot use my limbs with any strength. Thanks to that, it seems that I will be unable to participate in combat for half a month."

...So that's why even I could take her sword from her before.

"Aria and I were also attacked by Hilda. We somehow managed to stay unharmed though."

"I heard from Riko. But be at ease. After a month, she will be unable to remain in Tokyo. Tamamo is expanding the Barrier of Exorcism without stopping to rest. Hilda is already unable to approach the stretch of coast from the Tokyo Disneyland to Academy Island, Empty Island, Daiba, Shinagawa and Toyosu. The barrier is improvised, so it seems that it will only hold for one year, but Tamamo's Barrier of Exorcism is formidable."

"Exorcism...Barrier? What the hell's that?"

"Speaking simply, it creates a zone that monsters are unable to invade. There is no obstruction to human bodies, but if monsters enter the barrier...speaking in terms of humans, it would be like being bombarded by a neutron beam."

"S-Some amazing things are starting, from below the surface."

"It is not something that has just started now. In the first place, Tokyo, followed by Rome and Hong Kong, is a city with high magic rejection. Yamate line and the Central line outline the yin-yang of all things *in potentia*. It is well known that all magics weaken within it."

It isn't well known at all, is it?

I've been living in Tokyo for years and this is the first time I've heard about this gigantic SSR project.

"...Which reminds me, what are we going to do, Jeanne? Should we talk to Aria about Grenada and Deen? I haven't said anything yet, just in case."

"Indeed...let us stay silent until we are no longer able. Judging from her personality, she would go on the offensive if she found out. With Tamamo's barrier, this battle is one that is better fought defending."

"I was thinking that too. What should we tell Shirayuki?"

"Let us wait for Tamamo to decide. It would not be good for someone like you, inexperienced as you are in ability battles, to relay inaccurate information."

"That's...true. The specialists should do what they feel is best."

The moment I finished drinking my coffee...

Jeanne's cellphone rang.

"...It's Nakasorachi."

"Nakasorachi? She's in the room right next to us."

As I sat there wondering, Jeanne left me to myself and spoke on the phone for a while.

"Yes...I understand. Wait a moment, Nakasorachi...Tohyama, stay in this room. If she sees you, Nakasorachi will be unable to carry out her function. Talk with her using this phone."

"What is it? It seems that you asked Nakasorachi for something last week, but—what is it?"

"Indeed. I am making her eavesdrop on the transfer student's conversations."

"Transfer student?"

"L Watson. I suspect him."

"...!"

—Watson—

My eyes flew open in response to Jeanne's words.

"It seems that you have also taken note of this, but his movements are unnatural. All his records have been wiped, but we know he is not a normal person. His second name is 'Vein'—a boy who was decorated for his capacity as a spy, and a capable one too, for the confidential organization Liberty Mason."

"...He's..."

"I hate people who work in such a reprehensible manner. And many of my supporters in the tennis club have switched over to Watson. That, I cannot take."

Reprehensible...? Isn't eavesdropping reprehensible?

Also, it feels like you're just retaliating because Watson took all the popularity amongst the girls, but...I won't be saying that. It's promising that Jeanne is on the anti-Watson brigade.

"Tohyama, listen to this. It seems that he has made a move. He is

alone and speaking with Aria."

She said.

I took the phone from Jeanne and hurriedly held it to my ear as Jeanne walked into the room with Nakasorachi.

Peeking into Nakasorachi's room a little...I saw that the room was darkened, perhaps so she could concentrate.

Nakasorachi was wearing a headset, and I could only see her face flicker in the green, yellow and blue lights that came blinking from the control panels of the communication and acoustic devices. On the display panel, audio ranges were divided up into alevel meters, and there were several tens of them lined up, increasing and decreasing rapidly.

Beside her, Jeanne was also wearing a headset. She continued to look at the equalizer that Nakasorachi was operating.

Looking closely, Nakasorachi's feet were stepping on countless pedals placed under her, making it look like she was playing an electronic organ. It was like she was swimming through a sea of sound.

"—They are currently inside a shop. Daiba 191. The 3rd floor of Hotel Japan Airlines' continental restaurant — Terrace on the Bay. They have entered a personal room. The voices inside the room are comparatively clear."

She was firm and clear, almost as if she was a completely different person. I could hear Nakasorachi's voice, like that of a female news announcer, ring out firm and elegant.

She's *different*, only able to speaking normally through communication devices.

"Did you bug a place like that...?"

"—No. There is an EX-Unidirectional laser mike set up on the roof of the girl's dormitory gathering sound. If targeted at a surface location within a three kilometer radius, it can monitor the sound of

the direction to which it is set."

"T-Three kilometers...that's amazing. You can hear people talking inside a shop three kilometers away?"

"—It is possible. The microphone amplifies the vibrations of the voices that reach the glass of the window...the conversation inside the room is audible. Redirecting."

The power of science is amazing.

A conversation in a private room of a restaurant in Daiba can be heard directly here.

It's quite similar to ability. From my point of view, at least.

"'...hen, wha...did they Menu say?'"

Possibly because of the sheer distance, there was a little feedback mixed in with the audio, but...

This anime voice that I could hear definitely belonged to Aria.

"'...en I was in London, Menuette-san...said...ease take care...my older sister...'" "'...That girl...even though she's my sister, she looks at me from ab...so...'" "'Also...she said...the punishment game from that card game is still continuing.'" "'...She's the same as ever. It's disgusting. She's being rebellious...'"

I switched between being able to hear Watson and Aria's voice.

The line kept getting interrupted, but it seemed that they were talking about Aria's little sister.

Rather, did she have one?

Even though I've lived together with her for half a year, she never said anything to me about something as small as her sister's existence.

Well...I also hid the existence of Brother, so I can't really say anything.

She's probably the kind of sister that has characteristics that are hard to describe, or they don't get along or something.

But even so...I'm feeling a strange displeasure at the fact that Aria and Watson are talking about a common topic that none but the two of them know.

"—It seems that they are taking their seats. I can hear footsteps from Watson."

Nakasorachi looked down, as if focusing.

"—There is some strangeness in his footsteps. This is not beneficial information, but I will report it because it has been brought to my attention. Watson's body fat percentage is high. It seems to be 27%."

Nakasorachi...you can know something like that from this feedback-filled sound?

She really is a genius when you have her do audio investigations. All humans have good points.

But, a body fat percentage of 27%? That's a lot. Even I, who's already stopped going to Assault, have 15%.

Watson seems to be the kind of guy that hides his fat.

"—Aria takes her seat. Watson takes his seat."

"...but...what's the reason you're not coming back to England...I can have the ceremony by tomorrow, even..." "...It's too early for me to...think about..." "...Why are you hesitating? Do you have any other fiancés?" "..."

"—Aria is silent."

Nakasorachi's courteous explanation came through.

"'What's wrong...are you engaged to someone else?'" "'...'"

Watson repeated the same question and Aria remained silent...

"—There is someone. Every time Aria hears the word 'engaged', her heart beats loudly. Her body is experiencing other reactions besides that. The reactions of a girl who has strong feelings for a boy."

Nakasorachi declared.

Is that so.

Other than Watson...there's another fiancé? Aria being Aria, isn't she popular?

She didn't tell me about that either though.

"'Aria. It seems that your standing amongst the Holmes family is bad, but...if you marry me and enter the Watson family...your...also...the Watson family has succeeded with their finances, and now, we are more prosperous than the Holmes family...so...able...look back at them in scorn, you know? And your work won't be as something like a chief of a raid squad at the London Butei Division...but...if you become one of the Watsons...leadership..." "'..."

Watson spoke and Aria remained silent...

Irritation began to swell up inside me.

"'...Also, the Watson family has...Japan's political, judiciary circles...your mother's sentence..." "'..."

"—Aria's heartbeat has changed at the mention of 'Mother' and 'Sentence'. Starting to sweat."

"'...so...even if it's just on record...how about it, Aria..." "'...Let me think about it..."

Hey...

Let me think about it?

Are you talking about marrying Watson?

"Nakasorachi. Um...is Aria serious? Um...about...marriage..."

"She is serious. However, her tone...extrapolating from the memory of voice data of other girls the same age...her tone suggests that there is something that she is willing to sacrifice herself to protect."

...Are you serious?

Aria.

—Will you become Watson's?—

(Aria!)

At that moment.

My body.

—*Thump*—

What...

...is this?

—*Thump*—

A heartbeat that seemed to sear into me shuddered through my body. Twice. Three times. It continued.

That was what it was.

Blood is rising to my head—a sensation that I was no longer able to think.

It's similar to Hysteria Mode—but it's different.

It felt like I was being ravaged by these violent emotions.

—Steal her back...!

A voice spoke those words...from my heart, the very center of my soul, from the depths...I could hear the voice.

(*This* is...!)

I remember. My body has felt *this* before.

This is the same thing that happened when Sherlock stole Aria from me at I-U.

—Hysteria Berserk.

One of the derivatives of Hysteria Mode that my brother told me about.

Different from the ordinary Hysteria Mode, which 'protects' girls, this power is meant for 'stealing' them.

The hostility that I feel towards other men in these situations opens this state up. A dark, dark key—

"...Nn...!"

I leaned against the wall, clutching my chest so hard it looked like I was going to tear my heart out.

I...can no longer stop this flow of blood.

It's true that Berserk is a...dangerous mode. One's battle ability is amplified by 1.7 times compared to normal Hysteria mode, but in exchange...all thoughts are focused upon aggression. To give an example, it's a double-edged blade...something like that?

—But, who cares?

I started to feel as if it didn't matter.

It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

Conversely, I started to want to curse the cowardice I had been showing up till this point.

Why did I leave Watson, who was approaching Aria, alone?

Watson...this is a bad way of saying it, but...Watson, did you think I'd *let* you have my seat as Aria's partner?

It's true that he's better than me at a lot of things.

He'll be able to respond to the battles that are coming. His appearance is beautiful, his grades excellent, and he's wealthy.

But, *who cares about that...*!?

Aria is my partner.

If you're trying to snatch her from me, then...

Fight me like a man, Watson.

Don't do things like taking Aria from me by deceiving Aria with tricks of speech.

I won't hand Aria over to people like that.

—And Aria. I'm sorry. I won't be gentle with you this time.

I'm going to steal you.

Thinking about it, when I was forced to team up with Reki...you tried to do the same thing at the school train station.

Allow me the privilege of stealing you back.

"Tohyama, what's wrong?"

Jeanne had come close to me at some point, and I grabbed her shoulder.

I noticed that I had taken Jeanne's phone from my ear.

Jeanne saw that my eyes had become sharper, sharper than normal, and sharper than my eyes in the normal Hysteria Mode...she tried to say something, so I pressed down on her mouth with my right hand.

Immediately, I spun her around, hugging her head, wreathed in silver hair, to my chest—

I brought Jeanne inside the room, to a place Nakasorachi could not see from her angle.

"Uuu—!?"

Reflected in the mirror was Jeanne, struggling while embraced by me...

However, it seemed that she really couldn't exert any strength. She was at my discretion.

Be careful for a while. Or you'll be subjected to these kinds of violent acts by the current me.

"Jeanne."

With the fingers of my left hand, I searched out a white ear from between the strands of hair the color of ice.

I touched Jeanne's ear and she trembled at the contact...

Therefore.

"Don't make a noise."

I softly whispered those words into her ear.

Nakasorachi's wearing headphones and is concentrating on eavesdropping. Seeing as she won't come here even if she looks around at what's happening for a few seconds...it would seem that if we keep our voices to this level, she won't notice.

Jeanne, reflected in the mirror, tried to move again, but I pulled her hips into mine with my left hand.

"...!"

Seeing herself in the mirror, my mouth by her ear, Jeanne's ice-blue eyes widened—

Her cheeks and ears were gradually tinged with pink.

So that she could continue to breathe, I moved my hand from her mouth—but even then, I placed my index finger over her rose-colored lips, continuing to gesture 'to her to 'keep quiet'...

"—T-Tohyama...!"

Jeanne responded with a soundless voice, apparently having read the atmosphere.

"Butei should not feel lust just from hearing about male-female entanglements! Nakasorachi is in the next room, you realize? I do not claim to know, so I have no proof, b-but she is not able enough to hold back her scream, even if you try to calm her down. N-No, rather than that, HSS—"

Jeanne spoke that far before I whispered into her ear again.

"Correct."

"Wh-Which of the things I said are correct?'

"Currently, I am in HSS—Hysteria Mode. However, it seems that this is a modified form. I suddenly feel like going outside. I'll be borrowing your cellphone."

"Going outside...?"

"Continue to have Nakasorachi tell me the situation through the phone."

Saying that, I released Jeanne and checked the magazines of my Beretta and DE.

Jeanne nodded once before she slumped to the floor...was the sight of me in Berserk that shocking?

Hey, me.

What exactly are you doing?

After this, Jeanne's definitely going to go ballistic on me, saying things like: "What do you mean by that!"

I've only learned this now, but the me in Berserk is opposite from the me in HSS.

I am rough with girls. I could even be called violent. Like a carnivore—

I can only pray that I don't make these kinds of moves on Aria.

Because, when predators savage each other, all involved with be covered with holes and soaked in blood.

"—Watson as well as Aria are moving. There is a change in Aria's manner of walking. It seems that she's tottering, or in other words, stumbling about. They have moved into an elevator. Descending. The door is closing. Voice suspended—"

Nakasorachi's voice, connecting to Jeanne's cellphone from the headsets linked over WLAN, continued on.

By now, the tap had become just feedback to me, an amateur.

From within that, Nakasorachi picked up faint sounds and told me Aria and Watson's movements.

I returned to my room and picked up Python as well as some spare magazines. Better to have one hand than none.

Because I could not get Mutou's help, I had no choice but to ride my own bike.

The watch ticked over 22:00.

The lights attached to the front fork of the bike illuminated the road flowing past me.

I had tried cycling with all my might before, but the me in Hysteria Mode was able to output around 90 km/h on just a normal bike. If it's just Daiba, then there isn't that big a difference between this method of transportation and any others, right?

So I thought, but...

"—Voice has been recaptured through echoes off buildings. Watson and Aria are in a car. The car is a Porsche 911 Carrera Cabriolet. The soft cover is currently closed. Moving northeast on city

highway 482."

Watson was going out by car.

Northwest...He intends to bring Aria somewhere, not returning to Butei High.

However, there's no way I can race a Porsche with a bike.

"—Watson is speaking to Aria. Aria is not responding. She seems to be sleeping."

Sleeping...?

"It's unnatural. Tell me how she's sleeping, Nakasorachi. It's probably quite difficult, but can you?"

"—...Processing...consciousness levels are below JCSII-10. The sounds of the vital signs such as breathing or heart rate resemble the lowering of clarity that occurs with the application of anesthetics or drugs."

That bastard Watson...!

He did it this time. It seems that he slipped Aria a sleeping pill or the like at the restaurant.

I don't know what he plans on doing, but I hope he tries hurting Aria just a little.

Because I will return the pain completely.

In the most violent manner possible—!

(But...)

Where does Watson plan on going? If I don't know, I'll be left behind, unable to chase him.

Clicking my tongue in annoyance, I took the road under the monorail, heading to Daiba.

At that moment.

"—I can hear the sound of information being entered into the navigation systems of the car. The voice of the navigation system. Destination is...Sumida, Tokyo Oshiage 1-1-2."

"Nice assist, Nakasorachi. I'll give you a kiss later."

"—Please refrain from unregulated declarations."

Haha.

She paid attention to me.

The me in Berserk and Nakasorachi, across the communication device. Both of us are in personalities completely different from our normal ones.

"—Watson and Aria have reached the maximum range of audio capture. Voice was lost at the high-speed Metropolitan Shiodome Junction. Judging from the situation, I believe that you will be out of range—Be careful."

We've finally reached the limit of Nakasorachi's ears, huh.

But it's more than enough. She really saved me.

Because if I know their destination, I can chase them.

Wait for me, Watson. I'll wake Aria up and instead, put you to sleep.

"—In a hospital bed, that is!"

Looking at a map with my own phone, my destination...Oshiage 1-1-2, was...

—The Tokyo Sky Tree.

Its current site of construction.

Wondering if this was really the place and looking around...Watson's Porsche was in a nearby parking lot.

But there was no one in the car.

Checking the heat of the muffler, I estimated that it had been 15 minute since the car had stopped.

Using the light that I unclipped from my bicycle, I illuminated the ground of the construction site, the sandy floor visible through a metal fence...Ah, found it. The footprints of Butei High shoes.

However, there wasn't a set for Aria.

Watson walked while carrying the sleeping Aria, huh.

(Why...did he bring Aria here...?)

I looked up at the Sky Tree, about 7/10 done...It was tall.

So tall that looking up at me made my neck hurt.

I didn't realize it when I saw the Sky Tree with Aria from the classroom's veranda, but if you go to the bottom, the white pillars were terrifyingly huge.

It was a massive structure, so huge that I couldn't even bring myself to understand that it was a tower.

At the topmost part, the crane in the midst of building the second viewing platform...was enveloped by the darkness, becoming completely invisible.

Looking even more closely, it was different from an ordinary tower in that the supporting pillars were all lined up in a light helix.

(Is he...at the top of this?)

I scaled the metal fence, chasing the footprints into the tower interior construction site.

Because we were in the dead of the night, there was nobody. On top of that, there was hardly anything there at all—so my footsteps on the metal plates rang out into the air.

Staying vigilant of the shadows of the signboards and heavy machinery inside the construction site, I would, from time to time,

point my gun forward, going forth.

"..."

The footprints on top of the sandy metal boards had nearly become invisible...

At its end, there stood a temporary work elevator.

(...An elevator...)

If I use it, I'll reveal the fact that I tracked them here.

Like I care. The me currently, in Berserk, couldn't think of anything much more than attacking the enemy and stealing Aria.

I inserted a skeleton key I took out from the Butei Handbook into the keyhole used for operation.

The unstable elevator used a metal fence in place of a door.

As I stood inside, it ascended.

After riding the elevator up several floors, heading upwards, ever upwards, in the thick, white steel frame...

I was pulled up to a height at which planes flew.

—It's so tall. What amazing height.

It may be because I'm looking upon it at nighttime, but Tokyo Bay, below me, looked like it could have come out of a photo of deep space.

This is far taller than the rooftop battle on Landmark Tower, where we had fought with Vlad. This is far taller than the height we had flown at in the ANA600.

After continuing in this way, the place I reached was—

The first observation deck. I walked onto it, spotting a pillar on which '350m' was written.

It was dark, but the light from the streets reflected up here, so I had become completely used to the darkness.

The unfinished observation deck was in a state where the exposed concrete was just about hardening on the floor.

It was extremely wide, and besides a few materials strewn around the corners, there was nothing.

There were no sounds.

All I could hear were the sounds of crows crowing in the distance, apparently from the top of the Sky Tree.

There had not yet been glass erected between the pillars, which encircled the floor.

A gust of wind blew through the gap, bringing with it a scent of...cinnamon.

"...Aren't you good, Watson."

I spoke to my opponent.

Of whom I could neither see hide nor hair.

He's here. He's close.

"I've understood why you were undermining me at Butei High. You predicted that after snatching Aria, you would eventually face up against me...just like this."

I spoke to the enveloping darkness, slipping Python onto my right hand.

—In the end, the left hand part wasn't made in time.

If I use Slash, I'll have to sacrifice my left fingers. There'll be nothing left for me after that. No matter how disadvantageous the situation, I can't use it more than once.

In other words, I've been limited in my uses of this new, useful

technique.

Rather, it'd be fine to say that I've been completely blocked.

"Up till now, I've been working together with my companions in order to overcome. I wouldn't have been able to make it through the battle with I-U without the teamwork with my allies. You focused on that...isolating me was your first step. You've been doing rather dirty things just for me, haven't you?"

I didn't even have Mutou's support.

I was 15 minutes slower than Watson in reaching this place.

Anybody could do mostly anything with 15 minutes.

Hide Aria, slip himself into the shadows, and wait for me to show an opening.

Because I was forced to come by bike, the muscles in my legs were aching. In addition, I hadn't been eating well, so I was feeling lightheaded.

He forced me to start this battle from a rather disadvantageous standpoint.

"Get out here. Or do you plan to hide there like a little thief?"

I felt the air around me grow tense.

Like I thought, Watson seems to be the type who gets riled up easily. It seems that he's met my challenge.

"...What have you come here for?"

His voice rang out from the darkness to the front and left of me.

He finally spoke.

"...Do you need to ask?"

I cocked my Beretta, replacing any answer I might have had with the noise it made.

Fixing my eyes on the darkness, from whence the sound originated...I saw him.

He was on the opposite side of the circular observation deck. Behind the materials, a vague shadow, shaped like a human, moved.

20 meters away.

"I've come to steal Aria back."

"I won't give her to you, Tohyama. If you leave now...I won't kill you."

"Can't do that either, can I? I'm the leader of Team Baskerville. If a team member's taken out, it reflects badly on the leaders record...What did you do with Aria?"

"I put her to sleep with drugs."

"Is it really fine for you do that to your fiance?"

"Fiance? Ah. That's just for show, like playing pretend."

"Playing? I see..."

He tricked Aria.

I felt Berserk's malevolent blood flow grow one stage stronger.

"—Aria's too much of an idiot to be my official partner. She needs instruction."

"Well, if that's the case, I'll give you some instruction. Butei High style."

...From the heavens far above us, distant thunder rumbled.

It was as if it was matching my Berserk feelings.

"Tohyama."

"What."

"I'll say this now—In the UK, Butei are allowed to kill in self-defense. In addition, as I am a Butei of the royal court, I hold extraterritoriality. In short, even if I kill you here in Japan, I will not be taken in for any crime."

I see, I see...

...Well, there are people like that in Japan. Government workers with a license to kill.

My father was one. It seems that he never killed anyone in his lifetime, though.

"That's a rather cheap threat, Watson. Pretty suitable for a person who's all talk."

"I'll take those words as an acceptance to my challenge."

"Take it if you like."

I spat those words out.

As I finished speaking, I could hear a small hiss coming from where Watson was standing.

(—He's a *doper*.)

That was the sound of a needle-less injector.

If he's using it here, then it's most likely 'Nebula'. A stimulant for the central nervous system.

It's forbidden in Japan, but it's a combat drug used in Assault that temporarily heightens your concentration and gives you the ability to see in the dark.

From experience, dopers are...strong. They become resistant against terror and pain.

"I'll tell you something nice."

Apparently to buy time for the drug to take effect, Watson spoke

out.

"The reason I'm distancing Aria from you is to protect her."

"Protect...?"

"If she remains with 'Deen', she will definitely be killed."

Is he talking about Far East Warfare?

"Currently, five parts of the Golden Shell that protects Aria belong to 'Grenada', and two belong to 'Deen'. She is already exposed. To ensure her safety, I must first take her from the leader of Baskerville — you. You have misjudged the situation. No matter how one thinks about it, Aria should be affiliated with 'Grenada'...No. She must be."

"Vein-san. During the Bandere, Liberty Mason's representative said that you would remain 'Neutral'."

"Having looked at the situation, I have recommended that we ally ourselves with 'Grenada'. It is currently being discussed at our headquarters, the Grand Lodge. We will most likely reach a conclusion next week."

"In that case, you're giving me the chance to strike a blow against the enemy pretty early."

Saying that, I started to close the distance between us.

If we talk much longer than this, he'll have the advantage with 'Nebula'.

I'm aiming for an early conclusion.

Watson's voice, half a laugh, sounded back at me as I approached him.

"Do you think you can win? Overconfident Butei die young."

"That's can't be true. You're alive, after all."

...My footsteps echoed through the empty observatory...

Watson's figure became clearer.

He was wearing a completely black bullet/bladeproof vest that blended into the darkness and his feet were clad in combat boots that seemed to be inlaid with steel. His back was protected by a cloak-like bulletproof coat...he's fully armored.

On the other hand, all I'm wearing is Butei High's bulletproof uniform and I only have one of Python's hands.

However, my Berserk self abandoned all thought of analyzing our respective battle strengths.

No matter how disadvantageous the situation, I will bring him down. That's all there is to it.

"What's wrong? I'm in range."

I spoke those words softly as I stepped into gunfire distance.

—*Click*—

Watson had bought just enough time in order for the drug to run its course and he sprinted this way, his footsteps barely audible.

(...He's fast.)

Keeping his body low, Watson made his approach. He drew the bent blade of a kukri knife — doing this too, nearly noiselessly. The knife was also designed for nighttime use, its blade having been dyed black.

Right in front of me, Watson suddenly changed his course in the manner of a '>' character, swinging his blade like he was flicking it past me.

His aim was my right wrist. Looking at the trajectory, he wanted to cut my gun away along with my hand.

"...!"

I withdrew my finger from the Beretta's trigger, brushing aside the tip of the blade with my outstretched index finger.

Python's carbonized tungsten cobalt alloy raised a shower of sparks, forcing the knife to slip by.

I had withdrawn my finger in the spur of the moment, but now I see. Python can also be used in this manner.

Also, I had found something out in that clash. Watson's sharp and his aim is precise, but...

He doesn't have much strength.

Having noticed this, I drew my butterfly knife into my left hand.

"I should be the one saying that it's fine to run, Watson!"

The screeching sound of metal pierced the air as I crashed my blade's other edge — the sword breaker — into his knife.

And with that...I twisted his kukri's blade, bending the knife with brute force.

"...I too am currently a student of Tokyo Butei High. Running from the enemy is against school rules, is it not?"

Watson threw away the remains of his knife and flipped backwards, launching himself on one foot, his coat flying.

In the midst of his back-flip, the lightning that flashed in the distance faintly and somehow, in a beautiful manner, outlined his figure.

Just before he hit the ground, from out of his black sleeve, Watson pulled out a SIG SAUER P226R, a gun with the characteristics of a sleeve-gun, and immediately opened fire with it.

Around one to two meters in front of me, all his bullets scattered everywhere.

— Billiard Shot —

And that's not all. In the state of Berserk I was currently in, I pulled off something else.

I had mixed in one more shot that looked like it would miss.

"Ahhhhhh!"

Watson was shot in the back by my bullet, which had ricocheted off the pillar behind him.

L-Shot.

I borrowed the technique that Reki used while executing her manhunt on me...ricocheting a bullet off something to hit the enemy.

Thinking to follow up, I aimed my Beretta, but...

Watson fell forward and lay unmoving on the floor.

...Hey.

Falling down from one hit? He's not good with getting hit, huh...

"...Stand."

My enraged blood in the Berserk state pulsed.

And it had me shoot the floor directly next to Watson.

However, Watson moved not an inch.

Well...even if you're shot while wearing a vest, getting hit in the lungs means that you won't be able to breathe for a while.

"..."

He still...didn't move.

Did I hit his sweet spot?

Rather, if he dies because of me I'll be executed. Because of Butei's Treble-Punishment.

"Hey."

I approached him and grabbed him by the collar of his coat, just like a cat, and lifted him up.

"...Uuu..."

Watson groaned. Judging from his expression, he had fainted...

W-What's with this guy?

Um...I really don't want to admit this, but...Uh...well, it's the truth, so there's nothing else to do. I'll admit it.

He had a cute face despite being a boy. That's really weird.

Even though I was in Berserk, I was still weak against feminine things. Because of this, I faltered for a second, when...

Watson's eyes with their pointed eyelashes suddenly flicked open.

And he took a sharp breath with his deep red lips.

(....Uu!)

A sharp pain danced through my left eye.

Panicking, I pushed Watson back, feeling my eyelid.

(A needle...!?)

He had it between his teeth. I was tricked...

...Drawing out the needle pierced through my eyelid, I saw that there was a fine opening at the tip of the needle, which was approximately one centimeter in length. A poison reservoir. My junior in Lezzad, Fuuma, had a similarly hollow needle made out of bamboo.

My eyeball hadn't been hit, but as for the area between my eyelids to my temple...it had started to numb.

Playing dead and then using poison. As one might expect from

Vein-san. His methods are dirty.

At that moment, Watson, who had disappeared to my left side — my blind spot — as I was pressing on my eye...

Thundered two kicks directly into my stomach and face with his steel-inlaid combat boots.

"—I'll acknowledge this, Tohyama. You're talented. Deflecting bullets with bullets, even using ricochets...It's not that I don't understand how Aria could get so caught up with you."

Watson had once again opened up some distance between us. Pointing his SIG into the air, he swayed from left to right, as if to mock me.

I put my knife away, drawing my DE in order to bluff and buy some time.

But even so, I had to draw back.

As if it weren't enough that my eyes were like this, he had scored direct hits to my liver and jaw. I was in agony.

He had accurately hit the human body's weak points.

I'll be lightheaded for a while, so if I don't rest until I recover, I won't be able to fight.

"You would even be able to fight evenly with a top agent from Liberty Mason. However, it's a shame. I am one step further than that, the elite of the elite."

He's still chattering on. Trying to buy time, isn't he.

Time for the Nebula in his body and the poison in mine to run their respective courses.

With every second, he gains the advantage and I become disadvantaged.

"There wasn't much information about you, so it was expensive, but

it's just like the data said. You seem to be a problem child of Butei High, but in terms of combat ability, especially close combat, you have talent far beyond the rest. I agree with what was written, that depending on the training, you would be able to reach an expertise the likes of Kana."

...Strangely, he had gathered some information about me.

"You probably won't know about it since it's not an official statistics. On the SDA ranking, you're.....Is it called Superhumans ranking in Japan? You're in the Top 100."

Who, made this boring ranking.....

Flurries, get back to the outer ring. I'm outrightly an E-class in Butei High.

"…...So, is it working soon, Tohyama? It's already working for me here. The Watsons are doctors for many generations. Gaining advantage in combat by utilizing drugs--that's what we specialize in. Hehe."

Adjusting his P226R.....Watson walked towards me while laughing mockingly.

I turned my nose up.....adjusting my breathing.....I'm out of ideas.

Even if I can't see well with my left eye, I still have to fight.

"Let's settle our battle with Aru-Kata. This battle--is for Aria!"

Watson closed the distance with a flip.

--*clank**clank*--

1.5 seconds before standing in front of me, metallic sounds came from different parts of his body.

Six penknife-like curved blades from his elbow, knee and boots.

(--Full body weapons--)

This is somehow similar to the equipment of a senpai who is training at the British Army Special Force.

Seems like it's going to be a harsh battle. Including his gun, I'm going against 7 weapons.

With only half an eye.

smack!

*smack**smack*!

Watson's gun and mine are like blades dancing closely.

He keeps moving at my left which is my blind spot.

With these movements, he stopped me from pulling the trigger, overwhelming me by twisting my arm with his joints.

It's as if he's fighting under normal lighting condition, he can still see the details even if he's in the dark, with "Nebula".

My remaining bullets--are decreasing.

Firing the last shot, while intending to reload instantly and reaching to the back of my uniform……

……Hmm?

"Are you looking for this?"

Beretta--My magazine! Watson tossed it up into the air.

(He stole it during the melee!)

With my berserker's reflex arc, I prepared to tackle it--

bang!*clank*!

Watson hit the magazine with his P226R, out of the tower.

The Beretta can't be used anymore.

Then, DE--!

ding!

Aiming that bastard's chest, the DE that created a loud noise--missed him.

Watson dodged it by bending his body backwards with abnormal flexibility.

Watson activated his armaments again when he leaped, stabbing towards my right eye with his elbow's curved blade using some kind of Muay Thai technique. I dodged it by backstepping, a few hairs dropped in front of my right eye.

Dangerous. Next he aimed a kick between my thighs, I dodged it again by backstepping.

The blades came at me numerous times, I dodged as usual--

As the magazine size of DE is only 8, the bullets will run out very soon. But the DE's magazine--is lost. It seems that it's also stolen from me.

Too sly.

Out of bullets.

In order to swap to my knife, I retreated a few steps--

(Ugh.....)

Without noticing, I'd approached the edge of the observatory.

It seems that Watson had cleverly backed me against the edge while fighting.

Retreating further is impossible; behind me lay a drop of 350 meters.

Thinking this, I reached for, and gave up on, my seax.

It's gone.

I can tell just from the feeling of weight on my back. I'd been too focused on his attacks; this realization comes too late. After stealing it, Watson has either stealthily held onto it or thrown it away.

My butterfly knife is gone as well. He really went overboard with the stealing.

--Is this the drawback to Hysteria Berserk?

Bang! A P226R bullet flashed as it hit below the foot of the now weaponless me.

".....Hmm!"

At the edge of the observatory, I slid and fell.

My waist, chest, and chin hit the concrete in succession.....my hands barely gripping the edge, my body suspended in the air.

(Don't look down! Immediately use the cable.....)

I used my right hand to adjust my belt.....Da, damn, even that isn't here.

He only cut off the buckle!

I tried to find footing, but it's as if something is smeared onto it, it's really slippery.

I can't go up.

If I let go, the only thing I'll be seeing is.....the depths of Hell.....

Watson approached me, still suspended in the air, and kicked away my right hand which had been gripping the edge.

Twice, three times I put my right hand back, but--

Watson chuckled as he kicked my hand free once more, seemingly enjoying it.

"I'll teach you something. As it stands, your mind is filled with nothing but the thought of attacking me. It's far too easy to see

through."

I gave up on my right hand, aiming instead to leverage my Hysteria Berserk to leap over with a single hand.

But those black combat boots……calmly tread on my left hand.

"Nonetheless, your performance has been rather outstanding. I'm left with my last bullet because of you. What I did with your magazine just now, I suppose it's a pity that the 9mm bullets are hit out of the tower."

The force on my left hand is getting stronger.

Getting stepped on by steel boots, the fingers on my left hand feel like they will break.

"...nn!"

The pain shot up my entire left arm. My right shoulder drooped, the edge now out of reach for my right hand.

Endure.....I have to endure! If my left hand slackens, it'll cause me

to fall straight towards the ground.

But, under these conditions.....How do I climb up?

"I'll lighten your burden, Tohyama. You don't have to worry about Aria's future anymore. I'll make Aria happy."

--Aria.

That moment when I heard her name--

In front of my eyes, it's as if everything is playing in slow motion.

Watson raised one of his legs, readying a kick at my left hand--

".....Hmm!"

In my mind--

Every muscle in my body moved with blinding speed--Ouka.

(--!)

The only place in contact with the Sky Tree is my left hand now.

But, left wrist, left elbow, left shoulder, right shoulder, right elbow, right wrist--With these acceleration points, it'll work. If this were Normal Hysteria mode, it might not be doable--

Me in Hysteria Berserk, is all because of you, I've been driven to this extent by you.

If I can use 1.7 times my normal strength--Then just let me solve this minor problem--

(--Just let me do this one small thing!)

The moment when Watson's kick is going to connect with my hand-

"--!"

From my left arm to my right.

Both my arms accelerate with the sudden burst of strength from Hysteria Berserk--

My right hand is like a claw--moving with subsonic speed.

At the same time--

--*boom*!

Watson's heel descends on my left hand, which immediately falls loose.

In the air for just an instant, I closed my eyes in agony--and did not fall.

(.....Nice job, Berserk.....)

I looked up gingerly.....

My current position lies below the observatory's edge--my Orochi-equipped right hand is pierced into the steel wall, with me still hanging in the air.

I dug my fingers yet deeper into their holes, which are somehow similar to those on bowling balls.

It's worthy of rejoicing.

Now that's the 1.7 times of normal strength of Hysteria Berserk mode.

Piercing a steel plate with just two fingers, even I find it unbelievable. I have to thank you, Berserker.

"....."

Watson, wanting to enjoy the sight of my falling figure, lowered his head to look--

As his obsidian eyes grew large, I ferociously grabbed his hair with my left hand.

Even though my left hand is numb from pain, but--

It'll still grab him.

"I also.....have something to teach you! You are too overconfident. This leaves you full of openings!"

"It hurts! Stop! Let go of my hair!"

Like I care! It's life and death for me here.

My left hand not losing hold of his wildly struggling body, I used both of my hands to climb up.

It's all thanks to Watson who bent over to avoid falling with me, that I'm able to have a firm grasp.

"Hoo.....hoo.....You bastard! You nearly died!"

I, who had just climbed up, grappled with Watson--

*rumble**rumble*.....The observatory has become a wrestling ring for kids.

Rolling, we hit one another in the face and abdomen.

"Oof!"

Watson kicked me in the chest, starting by opening some distance between us.....

He flipped single-handedly to the edge of the observatory where I was standing just previously--creating the distance for a gunfight.

"*Pant*,*pant*,*pant*....."

I stood once more--

Seeing Watson crying while raising his P226R at me, I couldn't help but frown.

"Tohyama.....Yo, you.....to a noble, and one who isn't married yet.....Ah, no--You grabbed my hair, and hit me in the face.....! You, I will not forgive you for insulting me in this way.....!"

--It's just one thing after another.

Watson had been rather collected until now, but for some reason our wrestling just now had infuriated him.

I nearly had a hole bored into my forehead.

Now what.....Kinji.

I'm already bare-handed.

--Escape? It's possible to do so with this distance.

No matter how you look at it, I should be escaping under these circumstances.

Escape first, then alter the situation.....

(--No, I can't do that.....How could I escape!)

Oi, Berserk me.

Although I'm really thankful for just now--but it's still best if that kind of masculinity doesn't show itself.

You're wrong here.

But--

As expected, I can't do it.

I still can't do it.

If I were to withdraw now, that bastard may do something to Aria.

Although I can't express it, but--she'll be taken away. Just this, I understand quite clearly.

That's why--

"How can I.....let you take Aria!"

Although it's obviously wrong from a tactical point of view--But I

will not withdraw.

Thinking thoroughly, I have always been avoiding.

Watson's and Aria's relationship.....

That's why today--

I will not flee.

.....I will not retreat a single step!

Combining Berserk's compulsion and my determination--I stared into Watson's gun barrel.

What he's aiming at, is my defenseless head.

This is just like before.

However, things right now are worse.

Slash, Billiard Shot, Bite, Bullet Dodge--none of these can be used.

I'm weaponless. If I faint from using teeth, I'll be finished by his blade. Even self-destructivelly altering the flight path of the bullet with my hand; my left hand is injured from being stepped on, so I can't do this.

And yet--

It exists. A way to break through definitely exists.

As long as I don't speak those words forbidden by Aria--"I can't do it".

Right, that way.....it's this!

"Please aim properly, Watson."

I said--

May. I remembered the fight in the underground warehouse. That was the first time, when I used the prototype of this move.

--It's coming.

This feat of Hysteria Berserk, I'll be doing it twice tonight.

"No need to remind me. At this distance, I definitely will not miss!"

Surrounded by spiraling columns, the Tokyo Sky Tree--

That is, Sky Tree, a real tree.

Trees blossom.

--Ouka. Unfortunately, the other name of the prototype of this move, is this.

"--Spiraling--"

I spoke the name of the new move.

My left leg strode forward, and my right leg stretched backwards for balance.

Enveloping my left shoulder with my right arm, an awkward posture--

Wrapping myself with my arm.

I twisted my waist and my back to the utmost left.

--Twisting my whole body to a large extent.

This move requires adjusting my posture……in order to be the "reserve" of a certain seed.

What's scary about this is--

Although my head is facing slightly leftwards……my neck faces rightwards, with my right eye which can still see Watson staring directly at him.

I used my elbow to cover my mouth, my line of sight unperturbed.

I will not look away from the gun barrel.

"You're.....trying to bluff me. That's outright sorrowful, Tohyama. I would never have thought that you'd want to die in such a deceitful stance."

This move--

I'd lose my life if late 0.001 seconds, or off by 0.001 millimeters.

My concentration has to be highly focused. Increased to the max.

"--Amen--"

With a prayer, the gun flashed--

The bullet flew at the middle of my forehead.

"--!"

I took a pose similar to Shirayuki's quick blade draw "Scarlet Hotogi God"—

Twisted to the limit, I unleashed every ounce into the "reserve".

It's different from the linear "Ouka", but the rotary force exhibits similar speed—

The precise instant before the bullet is going to hit me.

My right arm started to wave from left to right.

The speed is——slightly slower than the speed of sound. This will suffice. It's not worth it if I hurt my arm breaking the speed barrier.

The "Single Hand Edge Catching" that I used against Jeanne D'arc in the underground warehouse, with its horizontal sweep—

snap!

With my forefinger and middle finger equipped with "Orochi", it's possible for me to catch the bullet in 0.1 seconds.

But of course, humans aren't able to block a bullet with their hand.

It'll still fly between the fingers.

But with rotational force, as with "Slash", the bullet's flight path will be disturbed—

"--!"

bang!

A spark exploded on the column behind me.

I waved the back of my right arm as if I'm brandishing a whip, my pose looks like I'm sending the bullet away……

I took a deep breath.

--"Spiraling"—

A single-handed "Slash".

I can't help but feel chills up my back after executing this move.

This move can be regarded as a nightmare. I really don't want to use it a second time.

Allowing a bullet to pass within just a few millimeters of my right eye.

If I wasn't a Berserker, a move that requires such fantastical courage……Who'd use such a thing in battle.

"……Now, both of us are out of bullets. What're you going to do now? Still want to continue?"

I turned my head and stared at Watson, who's standing at the edge of the observatory, and inquired.

"……Hmm?"

He may have done some investigation on me beforehand, but he's seen a couple of new moves. As we made eye contact, he looked as if a child being stared at by a giant—

He pulled back.

“Hey……! St, stupid! You’re going to fall!”

Out of bullets, and being stared by me who may have more tricks up my sleeve, Watson went into a panic, losing grip of even where he was standing.

“—Ah!”

One of Watson’s feet trod out over the open air, seemingly about to fall; as his bulletproof uniform flashed—

I took a head-slide pose (a baseball pose) and leapt towards the falling Watson.

“……!”

I leapt without thought for my own well-being, hugging tightly Watson’s ribs.

I might have bumped my forehead, but——it’s a successful catch.

“……!”

From a distance close enough that our noses could touch, Watson, who I'm holding—

Though pale-faced but a moment ago, turns suddenly red.

“What……are you blushing for!”

I slowly dragged Watson up.

“Wh……why save me!”

“—You’re asking this?”

Facing Watson who’s still trying to act strong under such conditions, I couldn’t help but smile wryly.

Watson who saw me with such an expression——Again he……

Revealed a puzzled expression.

Just stop! Indeed, you may be considered the bishounen type…… but for a man to reveal such an expression……

Man……huh?

Hey, hey……

To a certain extent one may say that I raised Watson up, to first allow him to sit on the edge of the observatory.....I turned his body around, now it looks like I'm hugging him from behind……

I'd completely grabbed his chest without realizing it……both of my hands gradually felt……this……this feeling is……

"……!"

Hey, there's no way……?

"……!"

Watson who managed to get up can't seem to stand, possibly due to the scare just now……The way he sits is like a mermaid princess, holding up only his upper body.

Also, he's looking at me with "deceitful, deceitful, deceitful" look.

At the same time, he's hugging his chest as if to hide something.

Epilogue: Go For The NEXT!! The Spiral Sky Tree -Tornado High-

“C-Could you be a……”Cross-dressing Student”……”

Stunned, I blurted out a Butei term.

But Watson just looked down silently.

--The so-called “Cross-dressing Student”, though a rarely used term……described a boy cross-dressing as a girl, or a girl cross-dressing as a boy in Butei High.

In Butei High, there were one or two students each year who, in order to investigate a crime under special circumstances, received permission from the Masters to cross-dress as boys.

From the looks of it……this fellow is a cross-dressing student.

That being said, she had indeed acted strangely at times.

She had never so much as glanced at any of the "cool" photos that Muto had brought, and that sense of danger I felt at first—I guess it was the instinct caused by Hysteria mode.

To willingly wear a girl’s uniform during the “Cosplay Cafeteria” event, taking into account his personality……it must be one of his tactics.

“The Art of War” that was taught during Inquesta classes did say that “All warfare is based on deception, the true may be false, the false may be true.” A so-called "All's fair in war" was nothing but an excellent criminal trick.

It means that the culprit not only didn’t come up with an alibi, but showed that he knew the victim. Then, he acted in a calm

demeanor in front of the Buteis and police.

This way, the police will assume that “the culprit will not let himself become the target of the suspicion”, and assume this fellow as innocent.

Watson, who has been faking his gender, had not overly resisted wearing the girl’s uniform……I guess it must have been to prevent others from discovering the fact that she was a girl cross-dressing as a guy.

(This can’t be true……)

Watson remained silent.

But her silence meant that she acknowledged her identity as a girl.

That mermaid was still sitting there, sobbing……sobbing……

Ah……she started crying.

No man could cry the same way she did. She really *was* a girl.

“Tohyama……why did you help me? Why did you help a person who intends to kill you……and who, at school, made you fall into a dangerous situation……why……”

“……Go and ask the great person who established the nine Butei Laws.”

“You must help a person in danger? ……Such……such a humiliation, I can’t stand it anymore……kill me! A Christian can’t commit suicide. It can be treated as an accident even if you kill me. You don’t have to obey the Butei Law!”

“I ran out of bullets.”

The lethargic me laid on the floor, spread out.

“I have bullets. They’re down there at the column, I’ve even hidden some blessed silver bullets.”

“Do you really wish that much to die? Also, wouldn’t you have beaten me if you had used them just now?”

“I am not allowed to use those things on humans, although you’re half-human, half-demon……”

Don’t speak such rude words so arbitrarily.

That is to say……There are bullets left?

If so, this time, I “won the battle, but lost the war”?

“I’m a……noble. If I lose, those things before……”

Watson wiped the tears at the corner of her eyes with the back of her hand, and spoke while looking at me who was lying on the floor.

“Since I lost, I’ll bear all consequences willingly. I won’t resist, no matter what you do to me. Act as you please.”

“You actually said such dangerous words. To the current me, you are just a girl.”

I flipped over, my back towards Watson, and asked.

I don’t even have the strength to get up and preach.

“……But why are you cross-dressing as a boy?”

“To get Aria to marry one of the Watsons. If Aria can marry me, she’ll become one of the Watsons. This is why I was raised as a boy.”

“……”

In order to pull her into the family, is it?

Coincidentally, the problem I’m facing now is the opposite.

What instant karma. What happened to Aria finally happened to me.

“The social responsibility of a noble — for the honor of the English nobles, not only do we need to succeed at the top of society……we also have to find a way to save the world while staying in the shadows. Where I am is a secret society where we aim for this practice.”

A society that saves the world from its enemies without reward.

Why does it sound like a place where heroes of justice gather?

"But while the Watsons are carrying out these missions, we've been on the decline for about 30 years. Due to our glorious past achievements, the Watsons have always served as elites. Such a popular household……although we've gained success at the top of society, we couldn't gain support from the more important leaders. So……"

"So they thought of using Aria?"

"……Yes……the Holmes may not be a member of high society, but they are in support of our actions. That's why, in order to nurture future elite detectives……or Butei, the previous generation's lord, after finding out about Aria's birth, signed a secret agreement with the Holmes……which is to let me, who was going to be born in winter of the same year, be engaged to Aria. Of course, the Holmes didn't know that I was a girl. As high society doesn't allow adopted offspring to become successors, we were left with marriage. For the sake of the family……"

……It sounds like a case of family feud.

I nearly lost my life due to this. That's really troublesome.

"But……Tohyama. This is not the only thing. The danger I said just now that threatens Aria does exist. If you're not "Grenada"--if this continues, Aria……"

Watson hesitated speaking further, while I stood up and spoke with an indifferent expression.

"I may not have chosen to join "Deen" at first, but I'll become the target of "Deen" if I join the "Grenada" now. It'll be regarded as a

betrayal, and I'll be frozen by Jeanne, or have a spell cast on me by Tamamo or Meiya."

"But……Aria……"

"--The way I see it, Aria and I are in the same boat. I can be considered as a forced partner. No matter who the opponent is. She'll defend if someone attacks. She'll get something back if it is taken away. With that as it is……I'll bring you to Aria."

"You won't become "Grenada" no matter what? Regardless of how dangerous your position is?"

"I'm already used to it."

Watson looked at me while sitting on the floor--

Although the surroundings were dark, there was something glinting at the corner of her eye……

Her body was emitting a girlish aura and I suddenly had a bad feeling.

"I understand……Tohyama, then I'll help you. As atonement. I'll also withdraw my suggestion of joining "Grenada", and suggest you join "Deen" instead."

After speaking, Watson stood up with her face full of determination.

Then……taking out two magazines from the back of the column, she said.

"Aria is up there."

I've no idea why, but she passed one of the magazines to me.

Then I noticed that the bullets were not made of lead but instead made of silver, though the caliber is 9mm, so they are fully compatible with my weapon.

"Why do you still have bullets?"

"......I can't tell you. Just take them. I'll bring Aria here alone."

Watson spoke with a sure tone. I can only take the bullets......

tick,*clap*...and load them into my weapon.

At that moment......

"I envy you a lot."

"Envy me?"

"......Actually, I knew, ever since the first time I saw you and Aria together, that the most suitable partner for Aria is you. It's because my lifetime goal was to acquire Aria that I felt unhappy when I saw that scene. And I was really envious. That's why, in Butei High, I went overboard. I'm sorry."

"If so, then just treat me to grilled beef next time. My revenge for food is strong."

Mentioning that cafeteria issue, Watson chuckled.

This is the first time I've seen it, as in, really the first time.....Just like a girl, smiling brilliantly.

She's actually.....very cute. She has her own good points.

"I guess I understand Aria's feelings."

"What?"

"This is why I envy you. As a girl.....I know it."

"What do you mean?"

"--Aria, she likes you."

.....

.....Ah?

What kind of gibberish are you speaking. Aria fires at me an

average of 7.5 rounds per day.

“Impossible.”

Watson raised her eyebrows and said.

“I understand your feelings a little. That’s why I dare say that you like Aria too.”

Again with this trick.

Reki had also spoken such words before.

Just how deeply is my relationship with Aria misunderstood?

“Although it was an audacious guess, you’re completely wrong. Do you know how many times I have to fight with Aria each day……”

Suddenly, just as I was about to finish my sentence, I noticed that the surroundings changed.

……

The streetlights and other electrical appliances suddenly went out.

Our surroundings plunged into darkness in an instant.

The current scene looks like a power outage. Streetlights, signal lights, and even the lights of residential houses are out.

“……?”

At that moment, the sky far above us suddenly lit up.

What? A plane……?

450 meters from the Sky Tree. There was a blinding flash at the edge of the second observatory.

“……Watch out! High!” [Editor's note: If this doesn't make sense, it's because the original was given in English, like it mentions below.]

Watson noticed the flash and warned me in English.

The light fell!

What in the world was that?

That lamp-like radiance fell towards the ground quickly.

No, that was no lamp!

It was too huge.

A gigantic ball of light of diameter approximately 2 meters flew towards my chest with blinding speed.

“Tohyama……Hurry up and leave me!”

dong!

I was knocked aside.

In front of my eyes—

Nothing but white.

“……”

She didn’t even have time to scream as Watson blocked the orb of white light with her body.

The crackles of static electricity discharge are audible to my ear.

Suddenly I felt a jolt of electricity run through my body.

This is Hilda’s move!

What happened!? It’s much more powerful than the one when we last met!

“—Watson—!”

Watson’s last shout burned itself into my memory.

The surrounding air has become a flow, spiralling upward due to the high temperature caused by the lightning discharge.

It was as if calling out to us—the air flow was drawing us upward—upward.

—Like a tornado, ever upward.

Go For The NEXT!

Afterword

Merry Christmas! This year Akumatsu-Santa is coming to a bookstore near you!

Along with the new characters introduced at the end of the last volume, the debut of the handsome youth who is Aria's self-proclaimed most suitable partner, and the unfortunate and lively Nakasorachi-san of Connect, allow me to present the triumphal eighth entry of the series!

The production of the long-awaited anime is well under way. MF Comics' manga version is on sale alongside YOUNG GANGAN's Hidan no Aria AA. The world of Hidan no Aria is steadily and energetically expanding!

Ok, now that that's out of the way, let's get to the Hidan no Aria Q&A Segment.

Q: "How many articles are there in the Butei Charter, and what are they?"

Now I'll answer this question about the oft-cited Butei Charter.

There are ten parts to the Butei Charter. When the International Armed Detective Alliance (IADA) was first organized, they enacted these articles which are roughly a collection of Butei conventional wisdom. (They can be easily confused, so please note that the ninth clause of the Butei Charter is not the same as the prohibition against killing that is unique to Japanese Butei.) The Butei Charter reads as follows:

1. Believe in your comrades and aid one another.
2. You must fulfill your contract with your client.
3. Become stronger, but more importantly, always stand for justice.
4. Be independent. Do not assist another Butei without an explicit request for help.
5. Move like the wind. Seize victory with the first strike.

6. Ponder alone, and act alone.
7. Be ready for pessimism, but act with optimism.
8. Thoroughly accomplish any and all assigned tasks.
9. Spread to all corners of the world. Cooperate with others without distinction for nationality or ethnicity.
10. Never give up. A Butei must *never* give up.

The majestic Butei Charter demands both cooperation and independence. This is something clearly emphasized on the final page of the Butei Handbook carried by Kinji and his compatriots.

The terms of the Charter originate from the school motto of my high school. Just as Aria is always explaining to Kinji, I was reprimanded quite harshly by my teachers, and their lessons have long been engraved into my mind.

Whenever any of you come across words of equal moment, please treasure them. If such words further come from within the pages of the Hidan no Aria world, it would be an unsurpassed joy for me.

Let's end this eighth volume here. Let's meet next on the television screen! Goodbye!

December 2010 - Akumatsu Chuugaku

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ The Yangtze river is long. The Yellow river is convoluted.
2. ↑ Unit
3. ↑ Kin
4. ↑ Zhuge Liang
5. ↑ First form.
6. ↑ A species of nine-tailed fox.
7. ↑ The italicized words have the same pronunciations, (a pun).
8. ↑ The luck referred to in the previous line is specifically used for mahjong. Also used for cards, (referenced five lines ahead.)